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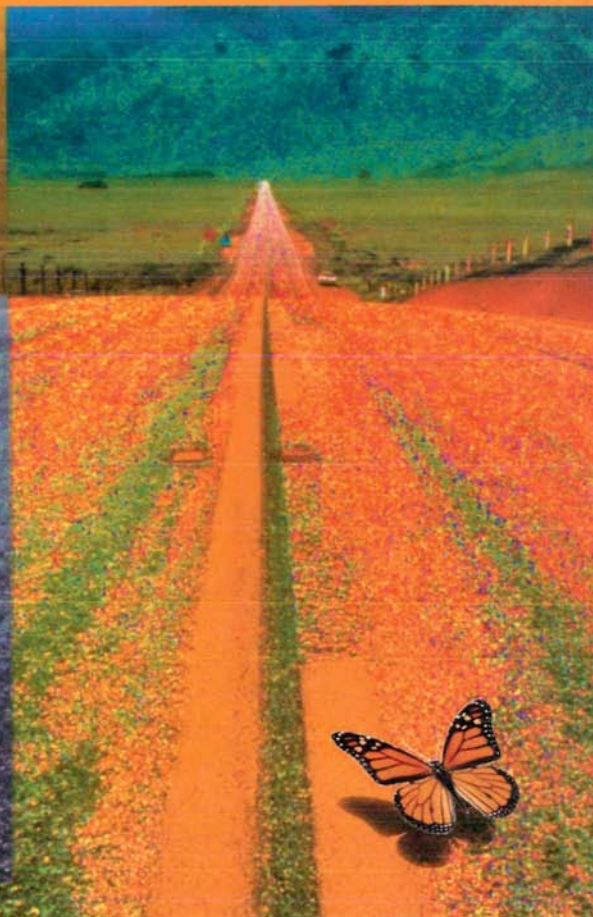
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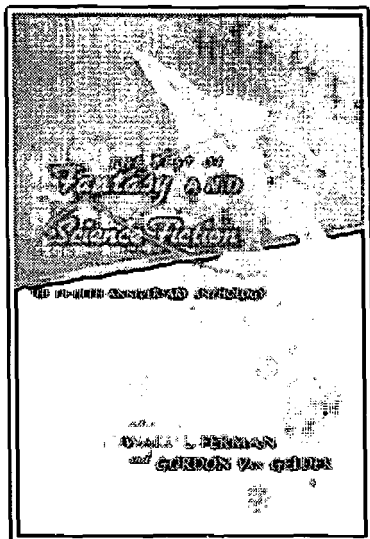
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In the sporting world, there are runners who excel at marathons and there are sprinters. In the fields of fiction, some writers are natural novelists or trilogists and others are best at shorter forms. Rare are the writers who are adept at almost any length. Kate Wilhelm is one such writer—her marvelous craft has produced short gems like “Forever Yours, Anna” and tightly-paced novels such as The Deepest Water (not to mention ongoing series novels, such as her latest book Desperate Measures).

But even decathletes have their best events, and in Kate Wilhelm’s case, it sometimes seems she was born to write novellas. Here we offer evidence to support this claim—a lovely tale from a master at the top of her form.

Yesterday’s Tomorrows

By Kate Wilhelm

HAL

I SAW HER WALKING ON THE shoulder of the road, a woman wearing a big straw hat, jeans, boots, and a backpack. I passed her, and could tell no more

about her through the rear-view mirror than I had already seen: a young woman hitching. I kept going for another mile or two, then I slowed down, and finally pulled over and stopped. A stupid young woman asking for trouble, was my only thought.

When traffic was clear in both directions I made a quick U-turn and went a few miles back to a gas station, where I turned once more, and retraced my path. I stopped in front of her on the side of the road, opened my door enough to lean out, and called, “Do you want a lift?”

She kept walking steadily, and I had the impression that she was studying me as intently as I was studying her. She could not have gotten any more out of the careful scrutiny than I did; we were both wearing sunglasses, and her hat shaded her face. She nodded.

When she came to the passenger side I unlocked the door. "Put your gear in the back."

She rooted around in her backpack, rearranging things before she opened the door, then tossed the pack inside, and climbed into the passenger seat. She unclipped a water bottle from her belt and put it on the floor at her feet, stashed a handbag on the seat next to her, and fastened her seat belt.

"Tilly," she said then. She took off the straw hat and tossed it in the back. Her hair was dark blond and shaggy, thick, and cut short.

"Hal Whitcombe." I shifted gears and started to drive again. The car was a six-year-old Acura. I had bought it the week after my ex-wife filed for divorce.

"Now you tell me how dangerous it is for a woman to hitchhike," she said, looking straight ahead. "And I tell you how dangerous it is to pick up strangers."

"Consider it said."

For a long time neither of us spoke again. Big fleecy clouds were forming; later they would swell, darken, and turn into thunderheads. The landscape there in Ohio was pretty: rolling hills, lush-looking dairy country, farming country, rain-fresh and bright green. This time of year, early June, it was also thunderstorm country, even tornado country.

"Where are you heading?" I asked, breaking the prolonged silence.

"Marin County, California."

Right, I thought. She had noticed my California license plate. She continued to gaze out the windshield.

"You intended to walk to California?"

"Walk, take buses, maybe rent a car or hop a flight somewhere. I'm in no hurry."

It was like that: I drove and she watched the landscape ease by; now and then one of us said something inconsequential. When I passed a bunch of kids on bikes, she said, "That never occurred to me. I could buy a bike, or even a motorcycle."

Later, as she turned to gaze at a flock of sheep on the incredibly green grass, I said, "Last week I was in Vermont visiting my daughter, who raises goats on an organic farm."

"And kids?" she murmured.

"Both kinds. She has two children, one coming along."

"A vegan? Natural birth, herbal teas?"

"All the above." And, I added silently, with a master's in French literature.

She was giving me a long appraising glance now. "You don't look like a grandfather. You started pretty young."

"Forty-seven."

"Thirty, thirty-one next month."

"You don't look it."

"I get carded all the time."

I was slowing down again as we approached a small town. "Lunch time," I said.

"Okay. I'll pay for mine. All my own expenses. Not the gas, unless you want me to figure how much an extra hundred forty pounds adds to the consumption."

"One forty?"

"The backpack is close to twenty-five pounds."

"You could figure out how much gas your presence requires?"

She nodded. "It would be easier with a calculator."

I laughed, and was still laughing when we pulled into the parking lot of a tiny restaurant. Inside, she took off her sunglasses; her eyes were the blue/green of ocean water far out at sea. There were deep shadowed hollows under them. Over soup and salads I laid out my plan. "I'm going to San Luis Obispo, and I'll take you to Marin County if you want me to. But I intend to stay off freeways, interstate highways, and turnpikes. It's going to take time, and I'm in no hurry either. When you give the word we'll head for the nearest city or town and you can go on your way, buy a motorcycle."

"You have things to think through?"

"Something like that."

"Me, too."

"When we stop for the night, I want a good bed in a good motel. We'll tell them you're my daughter or something, separate rooms."

"Why tell them anything? We're traveling together and we want separate rooms."

I was prepared to pay for our lunches, and, I thought somewhat

grudgingly, for dinners and even her motel room. I had considered the alternatives and didn't like any of them: let her sleep outside, share a room, offer her the car for overnight — and have her hot wire it and leave. But then she pulled a twenty from her wallet and I glimpsed a lot more of them, and the edges of credit cards, and by the time we returned to the car I was fuming.

"You're hitching with money like that in your possession? And credit cards? Are you insane?"

She shook her head. "That was your opening speech, remember, and we considered it said and done with."

Then she said, "What we should do is consult a map, figure out how much farther you want to get today, then stop at a motel and reserve rooms ahead. This time of year we might not find anything if we wait too long."

We did that, and it uncomplicated life a great deal. Also, I learned her last name, or at least the name on the credit card she used. Tilly Dunning.

We stopped that evening in a town in Illinois, and at dinner she could hardly keep her eyes open. "Last night I was on a bus from Pittsburgh to Columbus," she said. "We stopped about a thousand times. A bed will feel pretty good."

I walked to her door with her, where she said, "Are you superstitious? Do you believe things happen in threes?"

"No. Do you?"

"No. Last week I lost my job, lost my boyfriend, had my car stolen, and my grandmother died. Fours. They happen in fours. Goodnight, Hal."

A gentle warning to keep my distance? That her distress was genuine, she really did have things to think through? Probably. In any case, prudent, and unnecessary. In my own room, I turned on the television and watched the weather channel, but I didn't need anyone to tell me thunderstorms were building. The air was tremulous with the threat of storms, and the entire sky had turned an ominous shade of gray-green. At eleven the first storm hit, and then another rolled in, and another, or just one big storm separated by breathing spells of ten or fifteen minutes at a time.

She was much refreshed when she joined me in the cafe next to the motel the following morning. What storm? she said when I asked if it had kept her awake. We consulted about roads; she would be navigator and

keep an eye out for our turns, and we would stop and make advance reservations as we had done before.

We fell into a pattern that became more and more surreal as the day passed. Little conversation, and then in disjointed bursts, followed by silence.

Corn country, as far as I could see, just corn with silky leaves gleaming in the sunlight. Late in the day we were still in corn country when a storm hit; we parked at the side of the road and waited it out, sweating, steaming in the car, while hail like buckshot pelted the windshield. The corn swayed and bent low but when the storm passed and the sun was back in place, the corn stood up again as straight as ever.

"Another day another test," I said.

"What do you teach?" she asked as she put the car into gear and started to drive again. She had offered, and even offered to show me her driver's license, which I waved away.

"History. In a very small private college, viddy expensive." And so we learned things about each other in driblets, a word or phrase now and then, assumptions, guesses, inferences. I learned that she was a biologist. I blinked at that. She had worked for the Herbert Mandrill Institute; I had to blink harder at that. It was like having a physics grad go to work for Einstein. Straight to the top.

She and Peter — no explanation — had had a fight and she had gone off to be alone; her mother had called with the news that Tilly's grandmother had died. The funeral was last Friday, a day she had spent walking in Pittsburgh.

Another time she said, "You know about chaos theory?"

"Butterfly in Brazil, tornado in Kansas."

"That's it. Easier to accept than simple coincidence. Everything caused, everything connected. Grandmother fell and broke her hip the year I was supposed to go to graduate school; instead, I went and stayed with her. Then Dr. Mandrill came to our school, Stanford, and gave a talk, and we met. I would have missed him if I kept to my schedule. A headhunter from the institute came around and interviewed some of us, and I was chosen."

I was driving again; her gaze was fixed on a distant point, or nothing, done with this bit of dialogue. A flock of geese began to circle, playing

follow the leader, spiraling in lower and lower until they vanished. It was still corn country.

"I watched my son get his MBA last week at Ohio State," I said, surprising myself. I had watched him kiss his girlfriend and hug his mother, and after a brief embrace I watched him take off with the girlfriend. Vacation, then a job with a brokerage firm in Cleveland. "He'll start with a higher salary than I made after twenty years teaching."

THAT NIGHT after dinner we walked the length of the town we had come to, then back to the motel, where we stood and watched a magnificently vulgar sunset.

"Is Hal short for Harold?" she asked, when the sky finally darkened to deep blue going into purple. "Although it shouldn't be, should it? I mean, they call the baby Harold, Har for short, and someone says, 'Har?' and you end up with Har Har."

I burst out laughing, and she murmured, "Sorry about that."

"Actually," I said, when I could speak again, "it's short for Halbert, a famous ancestral name on my mother's side."

She nodded. "My name isn't really Tilly. That's short for Astilbe. My mother was into gardening for a short time. My grandmother called me Tilly from the start, then everyone else did, too."

"Ah," I said. "But it could be worse, you know. She could have named you Nasturtium."

She started to laugh, a deep low sound far back in her throat that grew until it was boisterous, uninhibited. She was still laughing when she turned, unlocked her door and opened it. Her "Goodnight, Hal," was sputtered almost past recognition.

In my room, lying with my hands behind my head, I kept thinking of that great laugh, and I kept telling myself that I was not attracted to her. Proximity, loneliness, an elusive fragrance she emanated, a lot of things accounted for my feelings, I told myself firmly, but not a physical attraction or even old-fashioned lust. I just liked her. A lot. I was too old for her, a burned-out history teacher whose son would make more money in the coming year than he did, whose ex-wife made more than he did, whose daughter had turned into an alien creature; a burned-out case that no one on Earth needed. Graham Greene material. Midlife crisis. Empty

nest syndrome. Onset of male menopause. I was vulnerable, and she, suffering one loss after another, was more vulnerable. I intended to be extremely careful with her.

Then it hit me: Astilbe Dunning! Only child of Marsha Dunning, who represented a slice of the great state of California in the United States House of Representatives.

But as I drifted off into sleep, I kept hearing that wonderful boisterous laugh. I wanted to hear it again.

At breakfast we studied the map. "North or south? We'll have to decide soon. Prairie land or desert?"

We would leave Kansas that day. Even our meandering route was getting us across the country. Still, I thought, we would be another three to four days on the road.

"Flip a coin?" she suggested. "Heads it's the desert. Tails...it's the desert."

"Consider it flipped." We went to the car and pointed it more or less toward Pueblo, Colorado, and started. Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and finally California. A lot of country to cover. And no one in a hurry.

Grassland, as flat as a pond, and it was getting hotter, without a cloud in the sky; the only wind that stirred was caused by the passage of infrequent traffic. At our next stop I bought a straw hat, a cooler that we filled with ice and stuff to drink, and a large bottle of sunscreen for me. She, practical creature that she was, already had sunscreen.

"Grandmother was ninety," she said, breaking another long silence. "I guess you shouldn't mourn anyone who lived such a long life and was contented."

She had stayed with her grandmother more than with her mother after Marsha Dunning got into politics, when Tilly was five or six. Her father was campaign manager, fund raiser, gofer, adviser; they were both busy most of the time, gone most of the time.

"The whole family seemed to think Grandmother was a nut case," she said. "She was interested in everything: spiritualism, parapsychology, religion, quantum mechanics, all science, in fact — Grandfather was a physicist — but they seemed to think she believed in whatever she was reading at any given time. Mother said she was so credulous she thought the show *X-Files* was a documentary."

Tilly turned to gaze out the side window, away from my glances. But she continued to talk about her grandmother in a low voice, as if this was one of the things she had to think through.

"We used to have the most terrific discussions. The family said we fought all the time, but we never fought. We argued and discussed things and got excited, and we both loved it. She said I was the only one left who acted as if she was still a rational, intelligent human being." She paused, then said, "When I was fourteen or fifteen she said I, God help me, was a reincarnated Jesuit. I said I didn't believe in reincarnation, and she said that didn't make a bit of difference. There it was. Or worse, maybe a reincarnated lawyer, or horrors! a reincarnated Jesuitical lawyer! She left me her house."

She said this last with what sounded like despair. Before I could think of a comment, she went on.

"I told her not to. I had a great job with a world-famous scientist all the way across the country, and a boyfriend who was getting serious, and what would I do with her house? And besides, the family would be furious."

During the past year her grandmother had had everything in her house appraised, and afterward had given her three children the sterling silver, the crystal, the good chinaware, some antiques; she had some money in stocks and bonds, and in her will she divided everything equally. But the house was for Tilly.

"You remember that butterfly in Brazil?" Tilly said. "It started flapping its wings a long, long time ago. During the Manhattan Project it unzipped its sleeping bag, emerged, and gave a mighty flap. My grandfather worked on the project but, when they dropped the bombs, he walked out and got a job teaching. I never knew him; he died the year I was born. I told you how Dr. Mandrill came to Stanford to speak. He said it was a very special occasion for him, an important anniversary, that exactly thirty years earlier a famous physics professor, Dr. Cherny, at that same university, had advised him to leave physics and do something else. My grandfather.

"Of course, my name was different; Mother married Bob Dunning, and Grandfather's name was Theodore Cherny. There was no reason for him to suspect that the granddaughter of the man responsible for his fame

and fortune was in the audience that day." She gave a little shrug and said nothing else.

"Threes," I said when it appeared that she was disinclined to start talking again. "Mandrill left physics for biology; your grandfather died, and you were born. Three."

"Four," she said. "I went to work for Mandrill."

"Thirty years later."

"Doesn't matter. In chains like that time doesn't count."

Up ahead, the flat landscape was broken by a clump of cottonwoods and a few small gray buildings. A town. Civilization. There hadn't been a house, a ranch, cattle, anything else for a long time. Sage and cactus had begun to appear; there were no more wide expanses of good grazing land. Clumps of desert grasses that looked like rusty bayonets poked up through the ground here and there.

"Break," I said, nodding toward the town.

"Good. I'm parched. This water is stale and warm. Yuck."

I envied her the water bottle actually, and planned to buy one for myself at the next place we stopped.

"A ghost town," she said a moment later.

A huddle of ruined buildings looked as if the barbarians had come, won, and moved on, leaving only a cluster of sad cottonwood trees, a patch of sparse green grass, and gray falling-down houses. And silence. That was okay. Since I wanted to stretch my legs, and I wanted to think, I didn't need people or a gas station.

I knew about Ted Cherny. He had become an outspoken critic of nuclear energy, the arms race, the whole scene, had written articles, made speeches, all fiery and passionate, and unheeded. I thought he had changed his field to quantum mechanics — the woo-woo branch of physics, they called it — and I knew nothing more about him.

But what he had not done, I was certain, was teach physics to undergraduates, and that meant that Mandrill had made it all the way to graduate school; then Cherny had advised him to get out. And he had. Why?

I parked on the broken-up concrete of what used to be a filling station. All that remained was a metal plate where the pump had been, and a pile of rotten wood. We took bottles of juice from the cooler and walked around the ruins to the shade of the trees.

"Spooky, isn't it?" she said. "Probably there was a spring here with more trees, a little grove even. They cut down the trees to build the town, destroyed the spring, and moved on. We tend to do that, don't we?"

"That's our way. Tell me something about Mandrill, what he's like to work for."

She shrugged. "Slave driver. We called him Simon Legree." She was studying the ground as she walked, as if looking for the source of the water that nourished the struggling grass. "I imagine there are rattlers around, and scorpions."

"And Gila monsters. About Mandrill...."

She gave me a quick look, then examined the grass again. "I learned a secret about him. He has a magic closet where he keeps his other persona, the one he puts on for public appearances, or when he is snuggling up to money men, things of that sort. He goes in as the baboon and comes out Prince Charming. He can be witty and smooth. That's who he was when I met him the first time at Stanford, Prince Charming himself. But in his lair? Pure mandrill." She gave me another quick look. "You know about mandrills?"

"Big, mean-tempered baboons, colorful, African. Does his institute make much money?"

"Bundles. He has a big staff; they do a lot of testing, DNA stuff, toxicology studies, all sorts of things. And they do a lot of pure research. Bio-engineering, plant genetics.... That's his line, the research. The peons do the other work. He has a dozen or more patents on processes, on genes, I don't know what all. The money rolls in, but there's never quite enough, and never will be." Her voice had taken on a bitterness that hadn't been there before; she gulped down the last of her juice. "Look, you can see the mountains."

Maybe she could; I couldn't. Not yet. We had a lot more flatland to get through. "Ready?" I asked.

"I'll drive for a while," she said, and we went back to the car and started again.

That afternoon as she drove I told her about my hobby. "It started as a favor for a friend, an independent film maker. She needed information about what Napoleon's army ate when they were on the move, and I did

a little research and told her. Now and then I do the same kind of thing for other film makers, television people. That's why I wanted to drive east, to think about if I want to go into it in a real way. Historical research institute." I laughed to show that it was nothing serious.

"It's what you like to do? Go for it. What are you waiting for?"

"I had responsibilities," I said stiffly, defensively. And now I didn't, I added to myself.

She snorted. "People put off things and put them off and suddenly they're old and it's too late. You meet them all the time, people who are going to write a book someday, or take up painting someday, or go to Tibet someday.... Just do it."

"My ex used to say I was driven by inertia," I said, and we both laughed. Not her great guffaw, but a good laugh.

That night outside Tilly's door I said, "One more bit about the mandrill. Its most endearing act is one that its cousins Homo Sapiens have adopted, the eloquent display of contempt by mooning." I was rewarded by her boisterous laughter.



WALKING THROUGH Bryce Canyon in Utah, properly awed by the majestic Martian scenery in shades of red, ocher, orange, gold, she told me about her work for Mandrill.

"I was put in the DNA testing section. For a whole damn year! Semen, saliva, blood, hair follicles.... For a goddamn year! That's not work for a research scientist, it's a technician's job, but there I was, ten hours a day, some weekends.... Peter said everyone had to start in testing, but he hadn't; others hadn't either. I finally went to Dr. Mandrill and asked to be transferred, and he snarled, showed his fangs, and said the door wasn't locked. I wasn't a prisoner. Then he said that actually he did have another job I could do. A cost analysis of the research he and Peter were engaged in. He was rubbing my nose in it. I was speechless, too furious to say a word, dumbfounded. A complete cost analysis of the past year, to be on his desk a week from Monday when he would return. He went into his magic closet; Prince Charming came out and took off for Vienna to attend a conference."

We were standing on a cliff overlooking a campground that appeared to be a mile away, straight down. It looked idyllic with green trees, red rocks, a ribbon of silver water. Even the gaudy tents looked entrancing. I wished we were down there, camping out.

Abruptly Tilly turned away from the view and started back down the trail.

"So you quit?" I said.

She shook her head. "I was going to, but Peter said I should do the analysis, show the bastard I could do whatever he demanded of me, and then ask for a transfer again. He said I'd caught Mandrill at a bad time; when he got back he'd be refreshed, in a good mood." She shrugged slightly, a characteristic little gesture I had come to know, even to anticipate. It meant she was done with that conversation.

We dawdled in Utah, taking side trips to this formation or that, each more fantastic, more beautiful than the last. Canyonlands, The Arches, wind sculptures done in shades of red and gold. We hiked up rocky cliffs, slid and slipped down others; my legs were throbbing with the exertion, and she complained that she was totally out of shape, but we stopped again and again to hike, to gawk.

"I'll come back here one day," she said dreamily when we finally were on the road seriously heading north by northwest, toward Nevada. "In May. Or maybe April. I'm sunburned."

"Me too." Sunburned, and wanting to come back in May or maybe April, whenever she did.

We stopped for dinner, and once more to watch the sunset; the whole world turned red and gold. Then we were driving in the dark of the desert mountains.

"You know about stem cell research?" she said suddenly.

"Not much. Forbidden territory, isn't it?"

"For government-funded researchers it is, universities, NIH, that sort of thing. They can't touch a human embryo, but privately funded researchers are charging ahead. Mandrill's into it. That's primarily why I was so eager to join his team. It's going to change the way we treat every human ailment there is eventually, the most exciting research happening."

The only light in the car came from the dashboard, red, green and

yellow dots of light that illuminated her face eerily; she looked as if she had put on a mask.

"What's the genetic code that tells the developing embryo that two hands are enough, that one appendix, one heart is plenty? And if a cell can divide and assign differentiated tasks to the various divisions, why can't they do the same with tissues already formed? Stem cells with the proper code sequence injected into an ailing heart should start making a new heart. Right? Or new lungs, or repair a damaged kidney.... Or replace cancerous cells with healthy cells wherever they are. That's the theory."

Approaching headlights silenced her, and she didn't speak again until the car passed, and its taillights were gone. Then she said, "Okay, that's sketchy, but enough. It's important research, and it's costly. He has a bunch of backers; I don't know what kind of financial arrangements they've made. He'll patent more processes, coding sequences, and he'll be the Bill Gates of biological science. His backers are often the most vocal opponents of opening this line of research to universities, by the way, on moral grounds. It's immoral to use human fetuses for research.

"Anyway, I did his damn cost analysis for the past year. He has a big team working under him, everything is expensive, and he has to show his backers where the money goes, I guess. But then I decided I'd show him what a real cost analysis should consist of. Not just one year, but from day one, and I went back to day one and started digging."

She drew in a long breath. "What he uses for show and tell is his first experiments. He used twenty-two Webber mice. They are specially bred from a strain that develops brain tumors. A missing protein causes it to happen to ninety to ninety-five percent of them and to the offspring of those that live long enough to breed. Five to ten percent spontaneously start producing the protein — another area of research. Why do they, and how? Anyway, he also had a batch of healthy mice that he bred and sacrificed in order to extract the embryonic stem cells. He injected half of the Webber mice with the stem cells; nine never developed the brain tumors, and neither did their litters. He had cured them with his stem cells. The missing protein had been restored.

"Two of the eleven developed the tumors after a year or two and their litters all developed tumors eventually, but they lived long enough to be considered middle-aged, or even old. The other eleven that he didn't treat

all developed the tumors as expected, and their litters were all missing the vital protein, and never started producing it. Doomed."

She paused, and I said a little silent prayer that she wouldn't stop now.

"His demonstration sent the scientific community reeling, and brought him backers who began pouring money into the project. He didn't have to reveal his decoding process, but everything else is on videotape from start to finish. It's really impressive. He and Peter were the only two working on it then; now there are fourteen researchers, and a dozen technicians of various kinds, and a big support staff. State-of-the-art equipment, most of one whole building set aside for that research."

We were driving through rough mountain country toward Price, Utah, our destination for the night. The road was reason enough to drive slowly, but I would have done it anyway. I wanted her to finish her story; I suspected that she would become silent again when we hit town.

"Anyway," she said in an even lower voice, "I found a mistake. At first I thought it was a simple mistake. The original invoice charged for too many mice, or else gouged Mandrill outrageously. I checked and re-checked, but Mandrill paid for two hundred twenty Webber mice, not twenty-two. I looked for other research that might have used the mice; there wasn't any. Then I checked on the food bill, cages, incidentals, and it all worked out to two hundred twenty mice. And the healthy mice to supply the embryonic stem cells. That whole demonstration is a fraud."

"Jesus!" After a moment, I said, "So out of two hundred twenty mice, you'd expect from ten to twenty of them to develop normally."

"Exactly. And they did. It didn't make a bit of difference what he injected into them. If anything."

We were both silent for a time. The road was a series of switchbacks, S-curves, downhill now. Before long we would be in Price, Utah.

"There's a paper trail," I muttered.

"There isn't," she said flatly. "Not now. Webber is a Mandrill subsidiary these days, and anything I found.... How long does it take to shred a couple hundred sheets of paper? How many scientists does it take to turn the crank?"

Of course, I realized: Peter had to be in on it. Her former lover knew all about it.

"What did Mandrill do when you told him?"

"He went postal. Really demonic. Accused me of being an industrial spy, said I'd seduced his chief researcher trying to wheedle information out of him, that he hadn't trusted me from the start, that's why I was in DNA, not doing research. He fired me and called security and told them to make sure I didn't take anything out with me." She laughed, not the happy uninhibited laughter I had come to know and love, but a bitter low sound. "He said more or less that I'd never work as a biologist again, he'd see to that."

Soon after that the lights of the town came into sight, and she lapsed into silence that continued until we checked into our motel; I moved the car to her door and unloaded her backpack. The second or third day out she had asked why I did that, and I had said, "So when you get up you'll know I haven't stranded you out in the middle of nowhere." She had smiled.

"It's strange," she said at her door. "I was so sure that it was because I was in Pittsburgh with too many people, too much noise, too much confusion; that's why I couldn't think. A long trip across the country was what I needed, I decided. But I'm exactly where I was in Pittsburgh. Nowheresville."

"You want a snack, a drink, anything?"

"I believe Utah is a dry state," she said.

"A glass of milk and a cookie?"

She smiled. "Thanks, but no. I want to get under a shower and stay for a long time, maybe even clog up the drain with sand and grit, and then fall into bed and die. God, I'm beat!"

She opened her door. "Goodnight, Hal. Thanks for listening."

It was almost eleven and I was as beat as she was, but I knew I wouldn't sleep yet. I walked across the street and down half a block to a cafe with an OPEN ALL NIGHT sign, where I had the place to myself. A sleepy, middle-aged waitress came to the booth and took my order for a ham and cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee.

"We close at midnight," she said as she turned to leave.

"But your sign...."

"Yeah, but we close at midnight."

I pulled out a notebook and started to jot down questions. No time to puzzle out answers, and I didn't have enough information for answers anyway, but I had a lot of questions. I started: Why had Mandrill hired her?

Why had he left physics? Had he started with money, or made it along the way? Why had her grandmother left her a house in California when she had a great job, she thought, in Pittsburgh? Why had Mandrill told her to do a cost analysis when he had a large staff within the research unit who could have done it easier and faster?

The waitress brought my ham and cheese sandwich and a cup of undrinkable coffee, which was just as well. I didn't need the caffeine at that hour. I asked for a glass of water and she told me again that they closed at midnight, but a few minutes later she brought the water. The ham was dry and salty, the cheese leathery, the bread stale; I doused it with catsup and mustard and ate it anyway.

I continued to write down questions. How and when did Ted Cherny die? How long after he gave Mandrill the boot? I was certain that had happened; it hadn't been simple advice, but a heave-ho. Why? And what made me so certain? Leaping to conclusions? I wrote those questions, too. I had learned to question my own research, suspicious of concealed bias. Had Cherny left notebooks, diaries, papers of any sort? Tilly had said the lawyer, acting under instructions, had put new locks on the house, the keys to be delivered only to her. If there were papers, and if the grandmother had kept them, they might still be in the house she had bequeathed to Tilly.

I was feeling the kind of tingle I always got when I started a serious research project, and felt pretty stupid for it. None of my business, I told myself. Tilly certainly had not asked for any help, and I doubted that she knew how to ask for help.

"Time," the waitress said suddenly. She started to clear the table.

She had been surly, but I tipped her anyway. She looked as tired as I was.

"Welcome to the Great Basin," I said the next day, surveying the desert ahead. We had chosen to drive north to avoid a bombing and gunnery range; neither of us mentioned that the diagonal highway through the state could have had us in Marin County, California that night.

"I've driven from Reno to Las Vegas," she said. "Flat all the way, nothing like this. I was doing about eighty when a cop car passed me and vanished in the distance. He must have been doing ninety-five."

This was not flat; we would cross one mountain range after another according to the map, all running north and south while we were heading due west.

In Utah the ground had been red and gold; here it was gray and black, the rocky cliffs were gray and black; black rimrock was sharp against a brilliant blue sky, with only an occasional tree, plenty of sage, and cactus.

"Tell me about some of the shows you've researched," she said.

I named some of them and she said, "Wow! You're all over the place. I thought historians specialized. You know, Civil War, or eighteenth-century Europe. Like that."

"I'll tell you what hell is," I said. "Teaching the same geography lessons to fifth graders for eternity. I like to roam through the past. What I taught was European history."

"You said 'taught.' You've decided to chuck it?"

"Yes. Hand in my resignation the day after I get home. And count my pennies." I was only half kidding about that part. I knew it would be tough going for a good long time, but I had no more responsibilities, I reminded myself. "Let me describe how I go about research. Pretend the baboon made a tremendous breakthrough and a producer came to me and said they planned to do a documentary about him and his work, and wanted a bit of the history of the science of genetics. Okay?"

"He probably will," she said gloomily. "But go on."

"Where would you start?" I asked.

She thought for a moment, then said, "Mendel?"

"And his pea patch. Not me. I'd go back to the Egyptian dynasties. They were breeding those sleek elegant cats and perfecting crops. The Ming dynasty, breeding dogs and grains. The Mayans, Incas...corn and potatoes. I read that in Peru there are more than seventy varieties of potatoes! They're still doing it, and we, people, have been doing it since the lights were turned on; Mendel codified it, made it predictable. But a lot of folks had it pretty much worked out thousands of years ago. Take the horse. From the wild first horses we got the Arabian racehorse, the Tennessee walker, the palomino, the farm workhorse. Even the poor old mule. We've known about selecting for what we want for a very long time. I think just about every culture has a taboo against inbreeding, incest — four-footed as well as two-footed — we all go outside our own family to

find a mate. What I'd do is connect it, give it a face, and demonstrate it from the macrocosmic scale to what's happening now inside cells. It's all connected. That's what I like to do, find the connections, make it come alive." Recalling her words, I added, "In making connections like these, time doesn't count." I glanced at her, suddenly self-conscious about lecturing her in her own field.

She said, "You must be a very excellent teacher."

"Was. I was pretty good, but in a cage. Who wanted to go to Tibet?"

She looked startled and turned away. "My grandmother. Grandfather was due a sabbatical and they had a trip planned to Tibet and India. He wanted to connect quantum mechanics to Eastern mysticism, I suppose. Way ahead of his time. They're doing it now. She just always wanted to go to Tibet. Then he died. She never went."

"How did he die? He was pretty young, wasn't he?"

"Sixty. Heart attack." She drew in a breath, then said in a rush, "There was some kind of scandal; he was in another woman's apartment or something like that. I was forbidden to talk about it, to ask questions, and especially to talk about it with Grandmother. My mother said it was too upsetting for her. It was a long time ago. I let it go. I hadn't known him, and for me he was just part of history."

"Did your grandmother ever talk about him?"

"No. Or maybe once. I was home for the midterm break and I walked into the parlor where she was napping in her chair. She was only half awake, dreaming, I think, and she said, 'Ted was a good man, an honorable man.' Then she woke up all the way, and didn't mention him again." She looked at me curiously. "Why are you asking about him?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to pry. Let's watch for a place to pull off the road and take a break."

We were both quiet for the next few miles; then she spotted a sign for a lookout, and soon we pulled off the highway. The vista was of a vast expanse of the desert, broken, tumbled, tormented land pitted with dry lakes and scarred with dry washes. We watched a dozen mule deer wander into view, wander out of sight again. Then, drinking orange juice under a juniper tree, I told her what I had reasoned about Mandrill.

"He wasn't advised to leave, he must have been ordered out. Why, I don't know. And when he spoke at Stanford and told the story about Dr.

Cherny, no doubt several people mentioned that Cherny's granddaughter was in the audience. I think he sent his headhunter out to net you. Nothing else makes sense."

"That doesn't, either," she said. "Why?" But her eyes were narrowed in thought. "He didn't use what little talent I might have. I was like a landscape artist who is forced to haul rocks. Menial work, technician's work. But why?"

"Maybe to force you to quit, have it on record that you couldn't hack it."

"Again, why?"

"I don't know. Revenge?"

She looked incredulous at the suggestion. She had been born two months after her grandfather died, she reminded me.

"I know it doesn't make sense, but there's a connection. Why did he have you do the cost analysis?"

"I told you. To rub my nose in it, that I wasn't being allowed to get into research. To taunt me. Meanness. Malice."

"Why such malice toward you? Is he a misogynist?"

"No, not really. Other women work there in every area. They're all okay."

"How hard was it to find the data about his first experiments with the Webber mice?"

"Not hard at all. It was right there. I spent more time trying to disprove it than I did to find it." She had raised her bottle of juice to her lips; abruptly she set it down hard. "You think that was on purpose? He wanted me to find it? Oh, my God!"

She jumped up from the picnic table and went to the guardrail at the edge of the cliff, where she stood for a long time. I didn't move.

Finally she came back and sat down again. Her expression was bleak and hopeless. "If that's true, it goes way past simple meanness. It's vindictive to the point of madness. He knows I can't do anything, say anything, not without proof. A disgruntled employee, a love affair gone sour...." She finished her juice. "Let's move on. I'll drive a while."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm okay. I didn't tell you I turned down three offers for a ride before you came along, did I? Two were pretty tempting. A very nice older

couple going to Las Vegas, and a woman about my age traveling alone to Denver. See? Fours. Always fours. I'm really glad you came along, Hal. Really grateful. Just thanks a heap."

She never talked much while she drove and for the next two hours we were both quiet. I wrote down a few more questions, and thought about what all she had already told me, made inferences and noted them. After lunch I took over the driving.

"Tell me about your grandmother, will you? What she was like. What she thought of your going into science, into biology, what she said when you took the job with Mandrill. Whatever comes to mind."

"Why? My problems are no concern of yours."

"I know you don't believe you can get to Mandrill. I know better. Everyone leaves a trail. If you hired me to find out what Leif Eriksson wore to bed, I'd start digging, and I'd find out. People write letters, keep diaries; there are bills to pay, charge accounts to reconcile, telephone records now. Nothing happens in a vacuum. I think your present problems started thirty years ago, thirty-one years ago, or even earlier. And your grandmother knew things."

"But, Hal, I haven't hired you to do anything. And I can't hire you. I have to start looking for a job and may end up teaching biology to high-school students, or go back to school and become a pharmacist or something."

"I wasn't asking for a job," I said angrily. "Have I said a word about money? This would give me something to do while I'm waiting for Hollywood or television producers to start pounding on my door."

"What is today?" she asked, and I thought that was her way of telling me to get lost.

"I don't know. Friday, I think."

"I have to call the lawyer and ask him to leave the house keys with security in his office building. We'll be home sometime tomorrow, won't we?" She didn't wait for any response. "Six days to drive from Ohio to California. We didn't set any records, did we?"

Not long enough by far, I thought glumly.

"It was always home for me," she said then. And she started to talk about her grandmother.

It was a ramble through time, back and forth from her fifth birthday,

when her mother had been busy with a committee meeting and her grandmother had given a birthday party; to the day she received her scholarship, back to when she started dating. "She expected good behavior on my part and it never occurred to me not to behave. She told me about boys. Mother never quite got around to it."

We stopped at a small town where she used the telephone to call the lawyer, then returned to say it was arranged. "He was so cautious, he made me tell him the name of Grandmother's dog that died fifteen years ago."

"Did you remember it?"

"Sure. She loved that mutt with a passion. I wrote a parody of a poem in its honor. Wag on, wag on, mutt without grace, All empty belly and vacant face." She laughed softly. "Its name became Wag On. Others thought it was Wagon, but we knew. Our little joke."

I put mental asterisks by several of the things she said during those two or three hours. When she told her grandmother she was majoring in biology, her grandmother had said, "I thought you would. I knew it wouldn't be physics. All those white coats. Karma."

When Tilly told her about the job offer from Mandrill, her comment had been, "Herbert Mandrill? Of course. He has sown the wind and shall reap the whirlwind." Tilly paused at this and added, "I thought she was dithering."

She rambled on, then said, "Her only response when I said my Christmas vacation had been canceled was to say she hadn't really expected me. And she told me she had willed me the house, that my room was there waiting for me to come home, and to remember to make soap now and then. She left a list of people who expected it in her notebook." Tilly glanced at me and grinned slightly. "She made soap ever since the Depression, but she refined it until it would have fetched a fortune if she had turned it into a business. Wonderful soap."

"Ah," I said, "that explains it. You smell so good. Her soap?"

She nodded. "She told me about the arrangements she had made, what all she had already given to her children, the instructions she had left the lawyer and the bank. Apparently there's a safe deposit box, and I'm to have the contents. She said there's nothing of monetary value, no crown jewels or anything like that, just things I might want to have. The password I'll

have to use at the bank is *Wag On*. That and the key will be enough. And of course she told the lawyer all that."

I felt the tingle start again.

We stopped short of the California border that evening, and over dinner I outlined my plans and asked for her cooperation. She agreed without a moment's pause. Either she thought I was a hopeless romantic, or my certainty that we would come up with something against Mandrill was contagious. I had to go home for a couple of weeks, I said, straighten out a few things, and then I'd give her a call and come up to the Marin County house and start looking through papers and books. She nodded.

"I have one regret about our odyssey," she said as we walked back to the motel. "I wish we had gone farther south to Roswell. How I'd love to tell my aunt and uncle, and my parents too, that I had been there to look for flying saucers."

"We could still do it. With any luck at all we might even spot some." She shook her head, smiling. "Time to face the music."



AFTER OUR SLOW cross-country journey, everything speeded up the way it does when you know you have a root canal coming. You put it off a month and it's as if it isn't going to happen ever, but then all at once, the

day comes.

Just like that we were in San Francisco. She directed me to the lawyer's office building to get her keys; I circled the block while she went inside; back in the car she directed me to the Golden Gate Bridge. Traffic was bumper to bumper.

"It thins out some on up the road," she said. "I always thought the cars must simply melt into the ground or something. Where do they all go?"

The cars melted into the ground, and it got easier. She told me when to turn off Highway 101, where to find a supermarket so she could buy a few things, and where to turn onto a twisting county road that reeled its way up a mountain.

"The residents hereabouts would kill to keep the improvers away from that road," she said as we entered a village that she said was it. Home.

Her house, I was relieved to see, was on a street with other houses just about like it on both sides. I had been afraid she would be out somewhere

with no one else in sight for miles. But these were turn-of-the-century Victorian houses shaded by mammoth oak trees and redwoods; each one would cost over a million dollars down in San Francisco. I didn't blame the residents for wanting the engineers to stay away. The village of eight hundred residents had become stuck in a long-time-ago, and they liked it that way. I did too.

Her house was pale blue with dark blue trim, ornate and useless little balconies at some of the upper windows, a wide porch that apparently wrapped around both sides of the building. Stained glass. Pure Victorian.

"It's beautiful," I said.

She looked at it as if she hadn't noticed before, the way people stopped seeing anything too familiar. She nodded.

We carried her things inside, and the interior was exactly what it should have been, high cove ceilings, intricately patterned mahogany floors, wainscoting, wide window seats, all well maintained, better maintained than the sparse furnishings, which looked a little shabby, as if her grandmother had stopped seeing them.

Tilly had come to a halt outside a door, and stood gazing at the room beyond, her grief plainly written on her face now. She would mourn, no matter how old her grandmother had been.

"I want to go through the house, make sure the windows are secure, that no one forced an entry, anything like that," I said.

She gave a start and walked on down the wide hallway to the kitchen, where we put her groceries down, and then she led me through the house.

"You don't understand life in a village like this. The neighbors would have kept an eye on things. They'll be calling, dropping in, bringing food — " The telephone rang and she smiled faintly as she went to the table to pick it up. "See?"

She chatted briefly. We toured the house, and then it was time.

"You could stay here tonight. There are a lot of rooms upstairs," she said hesitantly.

I knew. Four bedrooms up, one down. Probably more in the attic. I shook my head. God knew I wanted to stay, wanted never to leave, but not yet. I knew exactly what I wanted, and looking at her, I understood that we would end up in bed if I stayed. But she needed time to mourn, time to

sort out her emotions concerning Peter, her lost love, her lost job, lost future. She needed a little time.

We were walking slowly toward the wide front door when suddenly she said, "Oh. Wait a second." She ran back down the hall and in a moment returned and held out something. "For you," she said.

A bar of soap, her grandmother's soap. She stood on the porch as I went to the car, got inside, started the engine. She was still standing there when I drove away. All the way home I kept smelling the soap, orange blossoms, citrus, roses, too complex for anything I could name. It smelled like Tilly.

TILLY

She watched until he was out of sight, then reentered the house, and, as before, she paused at the doorway to the living room. That was where her grandmother had entertained guests, and there had been a lot of guests. A close community, much back and forth visiting, the family, Tilly and her friends.... When just the two of them were home, they used the parlor crowded with a television, a piano, an old stereo with LP records, radio, sofa and chairs, and her grandmother's favorite recliner, where for the past few years she had done much of her sleeping, usually with a book in her lap, or the TV turned on, the sound muted.

She shook herself, and briskly she went to the kitchen and put away her groceries, started a pot of coffee, and then stood gazing out the back door at the roses. No garden as such, just roses. It always smelled like a perfumery in the back yard.

"What about Sam?" she murmured. He was a handyman, gardener, fixer-upper, chauffeur, whatever her grandmother had required. But Tilly couldn't afford to keep him in spending money. How they had scolded each other, her grandmother and Sam. She could hear her grandmother ordering him down off that ladder, hear him tell her to leave the damn roses alone. "That man's as stubborn as a mule!" her grandmother would mutter.

Suddenly Tilly felt disoriented, almost vertiginous, and she shook herself and jerked around, back toward the kitchen, and drew in a breath; the momentary dizziness passed. The house was so big, she thought then. During the past ten years Harriet Waxman, a village woman, had come in

every day to prepare meals, do the housework, which hadn't been a lot, since most of the rooms had been closed off and never touched, but now that would be Tilly's job, too.

"Knock it off!" she muttered. The coffee was done; she poured herself a cup, then sat at the big kitchen table and began to make a list of things she had to do. First, go to the cemetery and tell her grandmother good-bye. Call her mother, let her know she had arrived home. Call the insurance company about her car. Go to the bank to get whatever was in the safe deposit box. Thank heavens, her grandmother had switched to a Santa Rosa branch, a lot easier to get to than San Francisco. See if the old Dodge still ran. It was fourteen years old, and although her grandmother had given up driving when she turned eighty, she had kept the car, and had Sam take her here and there in it.

She didn't expect her belongings to arrive during the following week; the shipping company representative had said it would be two and a half to three weeks, unless she wanted to use air freight. She had shuddered at the expense.

She knew she had to think about work, her future. But she was thinking of Mandrill and her past instead. Hal was right; it had all been deliberate, Machiavellian. And then she was thinking of Hal Whitcombe.

He had fallen in love with her, she thought bleakly; she had seen it happening, and hadn't known what to do about it besides pretend unawareness. But she had wanted him to stay. That was the problem, she really had wanted him to stay. Already their strange trip was taking on a dreamlike quality, the long silences, going miles out of the way to avoid major cities, interstate highways, truck traffic; the spectacular scenery.... Even the way she had confided in him seemed dreamlike, unreal; she did not usually tell people much of anything about herself. She remembered his embarrassment over what to tell the motel gatekeepers. "Don't tell them anything." That was her style.

But, God, she had wanted him to stay.

That night she dreamed: she and her grandmother were in the parlor talking on the telephone to each other, using little plastic toy phones. "Time is an illusion, dear," her grandmother said. "Think of it as a room without boundaries, with infinite doors, each door opens to a different

moment, all coexisting. They say that old people live in the past. It's as close as our language lets us get to the truth. We have learned how to open some of the doors, that's all it means, and we wander through this moment and that, and each moment is happening now. All our yesterdays happening now."

"You're talking about memories," Tilly said.

"No. That's the argument I used to use, it was just memory lane, and we got into fierce arguments about it. You see, I couldn't accept the inevitable conclusion that if all the past is happening now, so must the future be happening now, and we just don't know how to open those doors. Or we can't let ourselves open those doors. All our yesterdays' tomorrows, and today's tomorrows, all happening behind those doors. We have to believe we are free, that we set our own goals, determine our own fate. And we do to a certain extent, because if there are two choices, two outcomes, they both exist behind those doors. All the possible outcomes are happening now. How I hated the very thought of multiple, alternate universes."

Her grandmother's voice became fainter. "I have to go now, dear. I think my soap must be ready to pour."

Tilly bolted upright, clutching her old Raggedy Ann doll, weeping at last for her grandmother.

During the next few days she checked off most of the things on her list. Neighbors called, bringing little gifts — casseroles, garden produce, a berry pie.... She told the first one or two that a researcher for a television program was going to do some research about the nuclear arms race, and he would be around to look at her grandfather's papers. After that, the new visitors brought it up themselves. Sam dropped in and mumbled that he reckoned he could do a few of the things he always had done, cut the grass, check the furnace later on, just a few of the little things. She called her mother and listened patiently as Marsha told her what was happening in congress, bloody budget fights. Marsha Dunning was called the Firebrand of San Francisco; they loved her down there. If there was a march, she was one of the leaders; a rally, she was the rallying point; any protest, she was the foremost speaker.

The old Dodge still worked just fine, and she drove to Santa Rosa and emptied the safe deposit box. It was filled with papers, in folders, in manila

envelopes, paper-clipped sheets.... That night when she examined them, she leaned back in her chair and said, "My God!" Newspaper clippings about the death of Theodore Cherny, an autopsy report, and reports from a private detective agency. Her grandmother had hired a detective to look into the death of her husband; she had never believed the story the newspapers carried and everyone else accepted, that he had gone to a prostitute's apartment, undressed, had a massive heart attack, and died there.

She called her mother; Marsha's voice was shrill with alarm when she answered the phone in her Washington apartment. "What's wrong? Has something happened? Are you ill?"

"Mother, I found papers, newspaper articles about Grandfather's death. No one would ever tell me anything about it. Tell me what happened."

"For God's sake! Tilly, it's after eleven. If you found the clippings you know as much as anyone else. Leave it alone."

"Mother, tell me!" Her own voice rose and became shrill. "She didn't believe the story. She hired a detective! Just tell me what happened to him. Who was the student he went out to meet?"

Her mother sighed a long melodramatic exhalation; she had perfected that sigh over the years. "Tilly, there wasn't any student. That was his excuse for going out. He left and no one saw him again, not at the university, not in his office, nowhere. He went straight to that whore's place and suffered a heart attack. I know Mother hired a detective, and he didn't find a thing to contradict the story because that's what happened. And your grandmother was crazy, really crazy. She wanted to kill someone. I truly believe that your birth saved her life."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't want her to come around when you were born, but there was no stopping her, you know that. Anyway, she came and held you, and I couldn't believe the transformation she underwent. It was magical. A madwoman one minute, the next a calm and even serene loving grandmother. She talked to you in such a loving voice. I thought she said, 'She'll do.' Bob says her words were, 'She'll do it.' No matter, after that she was as normal as she ever had been. Then she fought with you exactly the same way she always fought with Dad. I suppose she just couldn't help it; she had to fight with someone."

We never fought! Tilly said under her breath.

"And that's all I know," Marsha said then. "If you have the reports, you know everything there is about it. I'm going to bed."

Tilly read and reread the reports. There had been a bruise on his forehead; they said it was caused by his fall when the heart attack hit. He had not died instantly. If anyone had been there to phone for an ambulance, he probably would have been saved. He must have been unconscious, from the fall and the injury to his head, the police said. He couldn't make the call and the woman in whose apartment he was found was working that night at a bar that catered to the university crowd.

They had found a key to her apartment, with his fingerprints on it, in his pocket. The private detective's report said he wasn't the only male on campus with keys to her place. She "worked" harder at home than at the bar. She had arrived home at two-thirty with a male companion, and they had discovered the body. She swore that she had never seen Ted Cherny before and she didn't know how he got the key.

Too restless to sit still any longer, she began to roam through the big silent house, picking out the places where antiques had been, aware of each piece that had been handed out to placate her aunt and uncle, her parents. She stopped at the doorway to her grandmother's bedroom, unused for five or six years since she had moved to the downstairs bedroom, but still her room in Tilly's mind. Everything neat and orderly, and barren, the dresser stripped of the usual comb and brush, the various lotions and skin creams. It looked like a hotel room awaiting a guest.

Sometimes when Tilly had been out, or up studying late, on her way to her room she would stop in for a moment or two if the door was open. Her grandmother would be propped up in bed reading. A brief chat, goodnights, nothing of consequence, but a ritual they both had expected. Now she stood in the doorway and hugged her arms about her body, chilled, and she said softly, "I'm not the one, Grandmother. I can't do it. I don't know how. And I don't believe in reincarnation today any more than I did fifteen years ago."

She took a step back and closed the door quietly, remembering her grandmother's words: "That doesn't make a bit of difference."

The days dragged then. The insurance adjustor called; they had found her car, completely stripped. They would process her claim and mail a check. She had to wait for the shippers to call about her belongings. She felt bereft without her computer, and she wanted her answering machine. She was afraid to leave the house, afraid she would miss the shippers' call. She wanted her books and all the journals she had not had time to read for years. Nothing in the house held her interest for more than a few minutes — no television, no book, music, nothing.

Finally, on Tuesday of her second week at home, the shippers arrived with her many boxes. She took clothes and books up to her bedroom, connected the answering machine, put the computer on her grandfather's desk, took the journals to the parlor, and then sat down and began to sort through them, began to read.

On Friday morning, reading an article as she ate breakfast, the words seemed gibberish to her and she knew she had absorbed as much as her brain could process. Her eyes were burning, and her shoulders and back felt stiff. "Do something else," she told herself, pushing the magazine aside, and swiftly the something else came to mind. Make soap.

She went to the shelf of cookbooks, and books on soapmaking, and began to thumb through one. She had watched her grandmother many times, and had helped her a time or two, but she never had made soap by herself.

The pantry had all the necessary supplies, and a cabinet held the fragrant essential oils in small dark-green apothecary bottles, carefully labeled and sealed.

She carried everything out to the work table: Industrial-strength latex gloves, safety goggles, scale, stainless steel pots, oils, lye, the mold. She glanced again at the directions: mix the lye and water — out on the porch where the fumes wouldn't be too fierce — cover the mixture, and leave it to cool. Weigh the oils — olive oil, palm, coconut, avocado, Vitamin E.... Melt the solid oils. Combine the essential oils.

That afternoon she was stirring the soap mixture when the doorbell rang. The mix was creamy white, thickening, but not ready to have the essential oils added, not ready to pour; she could safely leave it. She went to the door; Peter Kromer was standing there.

"What do you want? What are you doing here?"

"Tilly, we have to talk."

He pushed his way in and she turned and walked swiftly back to the kitchen. That drive, that push, an electric energy that he seemed to be emitting at all times had been what attracted her in the first place. He was not handsome, too thin, too sharp featured, piercing blue eyes — Paul Newman eyes, she had called them — dark hair, and that energy that kept him moving, as if constantly struggling against a strong wind.

She had a fleeting memory of the day she had been fired; she had walked for a long time, and when she thought he would be home she had gone to Peter's apartment. Every image was fiery, scarlet, the noises of the streets magnified, overwhelming, and then the world had gone from Technicolor with sound to a silent black and white film. When she told him what she had found, what Mandrill had said and done, Peter had become white, and the rest of the world as black as the pit. He turned his back wordlessly, and after a moment she walked out. Afterward, she had not returned his calls, had not opened her door when he pounded on it, and then she had left Pittsburgh.

"There's nothing to talk about," she said coldly.

"I called your mother. You never even told her you'd quit."

"I didn't quit. I was fired." At the work table in the kitchen she began to stir the soap mixture.

"For God's sake, what are you making?"

"Soap. And it's at a very delicate stage. I don't have time to stop and chat." Actually, she just needed to give it a good stir every ten or fifteen minutes, but she kept stirring, and watched the changing patterns swirl about.

He was moving through the kitchen restlessly. "Tilly, leave that junk alone and sit down. You weren't fired. You barged in on a famous scientist and accused him of falsifying data, the most serious charge you could have made, and he blew his stack. Anyone would have. Then, by implication, you accused me of the same thing. No asking for an explanation, no suggestion that you might have made a mistake, just a goddamn accusation that amounted to an accusation of treason, or murder, or worse." He sucked in a breath. "And then you dropped off the face of the Earth."

"Soap making is one of the oldest forms of science and art meeting at

the pass," she said, glacially calm; he was as restless as a volcano. "The saponification value of the various fatty acids, the oils, the measurements, all pure science, chemistry, precise and mechanistic as hell; the art is in knowing when to add the fragrance, when to stop stirring and pour it into the mold. Nothing scientific about it, pure intuition."

He grabbed her arm, and she jerked away and snapped, "Don't touch me! Back off!"

For a moment he didn't move; his face flushed, and then he drew away, jammed his hands into his pockets and went to the back door, where he stood watching her.

"We spent a week looking for what threw you off the track," he said harshly. "And we found it. You made a mistake that anyone could have made with the same insufficient data. The old man admires you for your courage in confronting him with it the way you did. He wants you back. I want you back."

She looked at him with incredulity. "I know what I found, and so does he. So do you. He wants me back about as much as he wants a broken neck. Get out of here, Peter. Tell him I'm not buying."

"I have his contract," Peter said. "There's a good raise for you, a job in my lab, three years guarantee. It's in black and white. Ready for your signature; he already signed it. This time off will be chalked up as paid leave due to the death of a family member."

She stared at him.

He began his furious pacing again. "Tilly, before the end of the year, we're going to set the world on fire."

She continued to stare at him, disbelieving everything he said.

He pulled an envelope from his pocket and unfolded it, tossed it on the end of the work table. "When you're done playing with your chemistry set, maybe you can find time to look it over," he said. He tossed a match folder down on the envelope. "That's my motel. I'll give you a call tomorrow."

He crossed the kitchen, on the far side of the table from her, then paused at the door to the hall, to the front of the house. "Tilly, you made a mistake. It's that simple. But suppose you were right, just for a second let's pretend you were right. Whatever happened then is over and done with; what's going on now is pure gold, the best goddamn research happening anywhere on earth."

She didn't move until she heard the front door close when he left. Then she stirred the soap mechanically; when it was ready she added the essential oils, the perfume, and poured the mass into the mold. It was a special mold that her grandmother had had made; there were raised section dividers, neatly marking two-by-three-inch bars, and on the bottom of each segment was an incised infinity symbol. When the mass was inverted and the bars cut apart, each one would have that symbol on top.

"Ourobours," her grandmother had said with satisfaction when the mold was made.

"The infinity sign," Tilly had said.

"Same thing."

She wrapped the soap mold in a blanket, washed the pots and the big plastic stirrers, and put everything away. When the kitchen was back in order, she sat down and picked up the envelope.

WHEN PETER CALLED the following day, she said, "I own this house now, and everything in it. I have to make decisions about things, what to do with things. I can't think yet."

"Just sign the contract and let me take it back with me, and you come when everything is settled."

"No," she said quickly. "Peter, I have to think. I'll be in touch."

"Can I see you before I take off again?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "No, don't. I just need some time."

To her surprise he didn't argue.

For a long time she sat without moving, dozing with fatigue. She had not slept much the night before. The contract seemed perfectly good to her, too good to be true, her dream realized at last. She knew that when — if — she went back, if the offer was legitimate, she would not go back to Peter. All the qualities that had been so magnetic, irresistible even — his energy, his driving ambition, his restlessness — repelled her, as if the magnet had reversed its field; what had drawn her before pushed her away now.

What had drawn her, she thought then, was the work, the prospect of

working on the stem cell research, the joy of doing real science, meaningful science. Mandrill had lowered the drawbridge, Peter could have opened the door to the inner sanctum.

It didn't even matter if she hated Mandrill. She wouldn't be working with him, not directly, but with Peter and his team. Mandrill was not the important factor; the work itself was all that mattered.

And she could have made a mistake. So furious with Mandrill, wanting to lash out at him, she could have made a mistake.

Under her hand the contract felt hot; she had read it so many times, she had committed it to memory. She pushed it aside and stood up. She had to check the soap, make the kinds of notes her grandmother had insisted on making about every batch: when it was started, which recipe was used, alterations noted, when it was poured, ready to cut, set on racks to cure.... She went to the bookshelf to get the loose-leaf binder that her grandmother had used.

She had even kept notes about the time of day she started, what the weather was like.... Hot, humid; stormy; high pressure.... Every batch was different, she had said, and the variables could be important when she tried to figure out why. Tilly flipped through the binder to the end, turned back to the last clean page, and started to jot down her own notes.

But something was nagging at her; something had caught her eye. She stopped writing and began to turn the pages one by one until she came to a list of names. People she should give soap to? At first she didn't recognize any of the names, not people from the village here. Some names had a line drawn through them; others had smaller notes by them. Barry Troutman, and the word: Computers. Intrigued and puzzled, she went down the list carefully and there was *his* name, Herbert Mandrill, Biologist. It was underlined.

She drew in a sharp breath and leaned back in her chair. After a moment she went to the top of the list and began to study each name, each notation. Most of them were males, only five women. One man's name had a line through it and in parentheses *d.Aug.1972, auto accident*. She found another name she recognized, Solomon Weiss. He was the editor of a science magazine. Another name had a line through it, and the note, *d.1970, Vietnam*. She continued to study each name on the list and found a third one with a line through it: *Samuel Neumann, d.1995, cerebral*

hemorrhage. Samuel Neumann. She frowned, and then remembered him. A physicist who had stood up to deliver a speech somewhere or other, and had dropped dead at the podium. It had made the newspapers. And her grandmother had noted it.

Why? Who were those people? Why the list?

"His graduate seminar students," she whispered. She counted the names, seventeen. The private detective had interviewed seventeen students, who all denied having made an appointment to see Dr. Cherny the night he died. But her grandmother had made the list and kept it updated. In the newspaper account, and the private detective's notes, her story was that Ted Cherny had said he had to talk to a student who was having a difficult time. No name mentioned. Herbert Mandrill had been one of the students. Herbert Mandrill, by his own account, had been advised to get out of physics, find something else to do. She stared at his name on the list, with a heavy black line under it.

That night she twisted and turned in bed for a long time before she accepted that she needed a sleeping pill or something, and she didn't have anything. A glass of milk then, read a boring book, clean the oven. She got up, jerked on her robe and went downstairs, to the room where her grandmother had died, where her grandfather had been born. She stood in the doorway and glared at the bed, the dresser with the familiar comb, brushes, face creams all in place.

"Get out of my head," she whispered. Then louder, she said it again. "Get out of my head! Both of you. Leave me alone! That's your past. It has nothing to do with me. I wasn't even born yet!"

HAL

The Mandrill Institute was an impressive array of buildings, old and new, situated a few miles out of Pittsburgh in a wooded area. I had to pass through a security gate with a guard who made a phone call, examined my identification, examined my face, compared it to the photograph in his hand, and finally pressed a button that slid the wide gates open.

I had called Mandrill's executive secretary asking for an appointment, and, as requested, I had faxed my credentials. Now I was on my way to

meet the great man himself. I had not doubted that he would agree to the meeting since it might well lead to more television exposure for him, and everything I had learned about him made it clear that he welcomed publicity.

The building I was directed to appeared to be brand new, with a lot of marble flecked with pink and gold. I entered a foyer, gray and black marble with sparkling mica. Big planters held tropical plants, many in bloom with scarlet and yellow flowers the size of dinner plates. A slender man in his forties came to meet me before the door finished closing.

"Dr. Whitcombe? John Newby. We spoke on the phone. I'm to take you directly to Dr. Mandrill's offices. I've seen some of the programs you researched. Very impressive. Very."

We walked down a carpeted corridor, everything gold or silver, black or gray, and absolutely silent. The closed doors on both sides must have been heavy enough to be virtually soundproof, or no one else was in the building. He stopped at a door and used a computer key to open it, then held it for me to enter an office, as silent as the rest of the building had been, with the same carpeting as the corridor, a desk, two telephones, a computer with a screen saver that showed a series of cells, forever dividing, multiplying, growing, becoming.

He tapped on another door, then opened it, and stood aside for me to enter. "Dr. Whitcombe," he said; he stepped back, and pulled the door closed.

This room could have been an average millionaire's living room, with arrangements of black leather-covered sofas and chairs, stainless steel and marble tables, gold carpeting that seemed ankle-deep, and a desk with a shiny black surface, no telephone in sight, no computer, nothing to distract from a model of a double helix done in silver. Or maybe platinum. On one wall was a flat-screen television, at least six feet by eight.

Prince Charming came forward to greet me. He was a big man, over six feet, with a massive chest, broad shoulders, brown eyes, a salon tan, a perfect specimen of good health, and today of good cheer. He was smiling broadly.

"I spoke with Ms. Metzler," he said, taking my hand in a no-nonsense grip. "Such a talented young woman! It would be an honor to participate in any manner in her proposed documentary."

"Well," I said, "I don't think it's really settled yet. I'm scouting out material to see if there's a story." In my introductory letter to Mandrill's secretary I had invited him to call Val Metzler, to confirm that she was considering a documentary that would include a segment with Dr. Mandrill, if he was willing to be interviewed. Actually, I had talked to Val for a long time before she had agreed to have even a minor part in this deception. Finally I had said, "At least you can tell him you've discussed it with a colleague, can't you?" Reluctantly she had agreed to do that much. She was the independent film maker who had wanted to know what Napoleon's army ate on the march. She hadn't a penny in those days, and there was no payment involved. I did it for the pleasure it gave me, but she felt she owed me; the documentary had won some awards, and had been the start of what promised to be a long and illustrious career for her, and a lucrative one. She had been full of questions, of course, and I had promised that one day over a long cool drink I would explain.

What goes around comes around, I thought then, as Mandrill steered me to a very comfortable chair. He sat down opposite me.

"Now, tell me more about her project," he said, beaming at me.

"If you talked to her, you may know about as much as I do. She's always very guarded at this stage, very general. She's the creative genius, of course, and I'm simply a fact finder; I never know exactly what she'll do with the material I gather for her. She got the idea that a documentary about the atomic energy industry would be worth looking into, starting with the alchemists, Madam Curie, on into the Manhattan Project and the present. She wants to have a whole segment about the Manhattan Project, with a slightly different angle. The supporters of the project have been lionized, but what happened to those who worked on it and became disillusioned?" I spread my hands and shrugged. "Anyway, that's a big part of her project, I understand, the dissidents and their subsequent fates."

Mandrill's face had frozen in the smile, I thought then. He had forgotten to turn it off. Now he said in a helpless way, "But how could I possibly have a part in such a project? I've never had a thing to do with atomic energy."

"I understand that someone at Berkeley, or maybe UCLA, told her that you had been a student under one of the protesters, Ted Cherny. That

excited her, that you had studied under him, and then went on to become such a pioneer in biology. She sees a story in that part alone, I think."

"Ah, Cherny," he said; he leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "A long time ago, Dr. Whitcombe. It was Stanford."

"With your permission, I'd like to tape our conversation," I said, pulling a small tape recorder from my briefcase. "Val likes to hear the voices of her possible subjects, to determine if she'll use them in person, or go for voice-over narration." We both knew he had a wonderful, mellifluous voice. And I knew he would never agree to a voice-over for his part.

"By all means," he said easily. "Tape away. Of course, I may say things on tape that would not bear repeating on national television." His smile broadened. "The first thing we should establish is that this is all off-record. When the time comes, would she do the actual interview?"

I nodded, fiddling with the tape recorder. "She always does." I glanced around the room. "This would be an ideal setting."

"This, and perhaps one of the trails in the woods behind the institute. I run there every day. It's quite lovely."

I imagined he was seeing himself on the trail in designer sweats, stopping to sniff a trillium.

Before I turned on the tape recorder, I said, "You understand that this is merely for substance, to give Val and her writers a direction. They'll phrase questions much more elegantly than I and there will be introductory material up front."

He inclined his head fractionally, and began. He didn't wait for any prompting, but plunged right in.

"I knew Ted Cherny more than thirty years ago when I attended his seminars on quantum mechanics, a field of physics in which I had never intended to become involved. He was a hard teacher, demanding, and he would brook no argument whatsoever...."

He talked for half an hour, lucidly, fluently, in his well-developed public-speaking persona with rising and falling cadences, pauses for effect, a bit of humor sprinkled throughout. He said that Cherny had been a little man, bitter and disillusioned, disappointed, too politically biased to do good science. "Those who can, do; those who can't...." He spread his hands.

"Is it true that he advised you to leave physics for another field?"

"Oh, that got around, did it? Yes, he did. I quoted Einstein to him: 'God doesn't play dice with the universe.' He became enraged. It was really the cat in the box that did it for me, however, not his advice. You know the experiment? A cat in a box with cyanide and an atomic particle that will determine if the cyanide is released. Is the cat dead or alive?" His voice was full of amusement now. "According to Schrödinger it is both dead and alive. I said I expected more of real science; an experimenter should not be part of the experiment; desired results should not determine the methodology that in turn must yield those results. Alternate multiple universes should not be necessary to obtain data; ever-increasing numbers of other dimensions explain nothing. I'm afraid I said many negative things about the entire field of probability theory. And he said probability theory was the future of physics, the only future, and if I wanted a dead cat, to take up medicine and do animal experiments, or something of the sort. He also said that I would be wasted in physics, that my talents should take me to an area where I could blaze my own trail. I felt as if lightning had struck, the lightbulb had gone on, bells had sounded. A magical moment. I was more than merely excited, exhilarated rather, as if I had attained enlightenment. Not medicine, but biology. A field in which an organism is either certifiably dead or alive, but never, ever simultaneously both. I was so grateful to him, I wanted to hug him. Those few moments changed the course of my life."

His expression sobered and he said sadly, "I was dumbstruck with my personal epiphany. We happened to be walking from the physics building at the same time and chatted on our way out, for just a few minutes, and I never saw him again. That weekend he died. I never got to express my gratitude; that's one of my greatest regrets, that I never adequately thanked him."

I glanced at the tape recorder, then at my watch, and asked, "Can you tell us about his death? Cardiac arrest, wasn't it?" I had noticed in the past that by feigning disinterest, or a shortage of either time or tape, I could nudge my subjects more quickly to the point. He was no exception.

"The circumstances were most unfortunate," he said after a pause, as if to suggest he was reluctant to discuss this, but duty compelled him. "Naturally you will look into his death, if you haven't already done so; you understand that whatever I might say is already public knowledge, and I

see little point in including it in any interview about him. But to fill in the picture, to give a direction, as you put it so well, I shall tell you what I know of the matter. He was a little man, physically, morally, perhaps intellectually; by the time I came to know him that was hard to gauge since he had become a mystic. But he, like so many little men, fancied young women."

I didn't mention the fact that I had looked into Mandrill's past, and knew that he had married and divorced three times, and his present companion was a former lab technician, twenty-six years old.

"The facts were quite simple," he was saying. "He was found naked and dead in a young woman's apartment to which he had a key." He looked grave and even troubled. "As I said, there's little point in besmirching the man after all these years."

"I have read about it, just as you surmised," I said. "According to the newspapers, his widow claimed that he had gone out that night to talk to a student who was having difficulties."

"I know, I know," he said sadly. "His seminar students were all questioned extensively, and none of us had a thing to tell the investigators. No one had made an appointment with him, and everyone had had difficulties at one time or another. The fact was indisputable that he had gone to the young lady's apartment, undressed, and suffered a heart attack. I'm afraid his widow was trying desperately to salvage a shred of his reputation, which was beyond repair. She moved away from the area very soon after that, humiliated, betrayed, disgraced."

I nodded and picked up the tape recorder, turned it off, and slipped it back inside my briefcase, where I turned it on again. "I think that's probably plenty to give Val an idea for her interview. You've been very generous, allowing me this time." Then I said, "I keep thinking of that poor man, alive and dying, knowing he was dying for a time before he lost consciousness. Almost like being dead and alive simultaneously."

"Like the cat in the box," he said. "Except with awareness that the clock was ticking, that the moment was coming. Perhaps crawling on the floor trying to reach the telephone, to cry out for help before it was too late. The images haunted me for months, coming as they did so soon after our conversation. Exactly like Schrödinger's cat, but with awareness. That's a good comparison, one I hadn't thought of."

We both stood up.

"One more small thing," I said. "Could you put me in touch with Cherny's granddaughter? I understand that she works for you, but the only number I have for her has been disconnected. If I could see her for a moment, to set up an appointment, I would appreciate it."

"Oh, I'm sorry. She's on leave of absence. In fact it's to settle the estate of her grandmother, who died recently. Cherny's widow."

"Maybe I can catch her at her grandmother's place. Can you give me that address or phone number?"

He shook his head regretfully. "She simply said California, and I didn't see any necessity to press the matter. She was very upset. I doubt that this would be a good time to try to talk to her even if I knew where she is precisely." He was leading me to the door, subtly but surely wanting me to go away now. "I doubt that she can tell you anything. She wasn't even born yet when her grandfather died."

"Well, I'll catch up with her later," I said. "Val thinks it's fascinating that the granddaughter of the man who advised you to quit physics now works under you as a biologist."

"I didn't even know that until her grandmother passed away," he said. "I hired a brilliant biologist, that was all that interested me."

He opened the door, and Newby was there as if by magic to escort me out.

In my rental car I switched off the tape recorder before I started the engine. Done, I thought. The point, the only point, of this whole charade had been to get in those few last words: I intended to talk to Tilly, and she might tell me things he didn't want told, and I, in turn, would tell Val Metzler, an award-winning documentary film maker who would probe and probe however long it might take to learn the truth of Tilly's accusation. The ball was in Mandrill's court.

Briefly, Tilly and I had discussed his possible future course of action concerning her, and she had adamantly ruled out any further action of any sort. There was no need for him to do anything, she had insisted, since he knew she was helpless, and, she had added bitterly, he would enjoy knowing she was aware and helpless. If he put a black mark against her name in the personnel file, what worse could he do? I didn't believe he would try violence; there was always the possibility that she had talked

to someone, had left a diary somewhere, had left notes. Violence might make investigators take notice of anything like that in a way her spoken words never would. But he would try something, I felt certain.

That was Thursday. I flew home that night, and had a busy schedule lined up for Friday and Saturday. On Sunday I would drive up to Marin County. So filled with self-satisfaction at what all I had accomplished during the past week and a half, I never considered what the offer of a real research job would mean to Tilly.

I ARRIVED IN LATE afternoon on Sunday. Ignoring the modern doorbell I used the old-fashioned knocker, a massive bronze claw foot. Tilly opened the door, then stood aside.

"Hi," I said, forgetting instantly the funny little hello I had planned. It was just as well; she was moving away, and there was a distant expression on her face, one I hadn't seen before.

"Come in, Dr. Whitcombe," she said formally. "We've been expecting you."

Then I saw another figure in the background, a stout woman in her sixties, who now came forward smiling.

"Harriet," Tilly said, "this is Dr. Whitcombe. Harriet Waxman."

"The TV man," Harriet Waxman said. "This is so exciting. I'm happy to meet you."

Tilly was leading the way to the living room, and Mrs. Waxman said, "Why don't we all go out to the kitchen? We were just having a cup of coffee, and I'm sure that after that long awful drive, Mr. Whitcombe would like some refreshment." Her glance at Tilly was mildly reproachful. "Wouldn't you?"

"Yes indeed. Coffee would be very nice." The whole house smelled like Tilly, I realized, the same complex fragrance of the soap that lived on the bedside table in my apartment. My bedroom smelled like Tilly. Following Tilly to the kitchen, I felt myself sinking as if physically dwindling. I had been as pumped up as a schoolboy going to his first date, and I was deflating second by second.

In the kitchen Mrs. Waxman bustled about, pouring a cup of coffee, arranging cookies on a plate, bringing out a second plate of cheese from the

refrigerator. I gave her my full attention as she chatted and asked questions. I couldn't bear to look at Tilly. Until I could achieve the same degree of formality and detachment she was showing I had to keep my gaze on Mrs. Waxman.

I had told myself that Tilly needed time to mourn, time to sort through her emotional storm, time to think, and obviously she had done so, and I had played very little part in the process. I felt foolish and juvenile.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Waxman said to Tilly, "I made up the east bedroom, aired it out and all. I think it would be silly for Mr. Whitcombe to have to drive all the way back and forth to the valley every day, don't you?"

"The last thing I want is to start the rumor mill churning," Tilly said sharply.

Obviously they had discussed me and my sleeping arrangements, and it appeared equally obvious that Mrs. Waxman had just given me her seal of approval.

"No one's going to talk," she said. "Besides, people would be disappointed if they dropped by and didn't even get a chance to meet Mr. Whitcombe. How many times has anyone from around here been on television? This house is more like a hotel than a residence, anyway. And I'll be in and out." She turned to me. "We're going through her grandmother's things, packing up things for the church donation committee."

Tilly gave her little shrug and said, "You can stay in the east bedroom if you want to."

"Thanks. I'll try to keep out of your way."

I brought in my suitcase and briefcase, and Mrs. Waxman, chatting all the while, showed me the east room, a spacious lovely room, as they all were.

After Mrs. Waxman left, and Tilly and I were alone in the kitchen, an awkward silence settled. She cleared the table, then went to stand by the door gazing at the back yard.

Frustrated by her distance, finally I said, "Can we talk?"

She came back to the table and sat opposite me. "I should have called you," she said. "I should have told you not to come. I did call; when your answering machine came on I hung up."

"But here I am, and I have things to tell you."

"No, don't. It doesn't matter. It's history." She smiled faintly. "Your department, history." She drew in a long breath, then said, "What if someone had unearthed a terrible secret about Darwin, something that ruined him, kept him from his great work? Or Pasteur? Or any of the great men?" She frowned at the table, a rock maple butcher block table that was as smooth as satin, and she began to trace a barely perceptible line of the grain. "I made a mistake, Hal. Two mistakes. I should never have told you what I did without proof, and there isn't any proof because I made a mistake."

"He offered you a better job," I said flatly.

She nodded. "A real job, doing real research."

"When?"

"Friday. Peter came here on Friday with a contract."

"I saw Mandrill on Thursday. He didn't waste any time, did he?"

She looked at me sharply. "What do you mean, you saw him?"

I told her about the interview, and she turned her attention to the grain of the tabletop once more.

"I have the tape; I want you to hear it, but first I have to tell you about the other interviews I've had. Three of the other seminar participants, two in person, one by phone. They agree that your grandfather was a gentle, kind man, infinitely patient with them all, encouraging to a fault. And they all said the same thing about Mandrill: he attended few of the seminars, and if he got a grade out of that course, it was a miracle, or he learned physics by osmosis. He cheated, Tilly. Even then he was cheating, and your grandfather must have called him on it and booted him."

She shook her head harder. "He was meant to be a biologist."

"And," I said, "I talked to one of the investigating officers of your grandfather's death. I read the autopsy report. They closed the case because they didn't have enough to go on to do otherwise, but one young officer was never satisfied."

"I have the autopsy report," she said stiffly. "Cardiac arrest."

"And other interesting details. Do you have it handy? Let me show you."

"I told you, it doesn't matter!"

I watched her, and after a moment she rose stiffly, and walked out of

the kitchen. She returned with a folder and put it down. The private detective's report. My friendly officer had told me Mrs. Cherny had hired a detective, who had turned up as little as the official investigation. I found the autopsy report and skimmed through it to the section I wanted.

"His knees were abraded, abrasions on his toes, on his arms, his torso," I said, summarizing it. "You can't have it both ways, Tilly, that he fell down, hit his head and was unconscious, and also that simultaneously he was dragging himself across the floor trying to get to the telephone." The cat in the box, I thought. Dead and alive.

"Just look at it," I said furiously when she kept her eyes averted. "And then I want you to listen to a part of the tape I made of the baboon. Not all of it, just a part."

She was as pale as death, but she looked at the autopsy report, then read it a second time. I got the tape recorder out and ran it fast forward to near the end. I had to start and stop several times until I came to the section she had to hear.

"Like the cat in the box," Mandrill said, without the mellow actor's tones this time, since he had not known I was still taping. "Except with awareness that the clock was ticking, that the moment was coming. Perhaps crawling on the floor trying to reach the telephone, to cry out for help before it was too late.... Exactly like Schrödinger's cat, but with awareness...."

"The police didn't release the report about the abrasions," I said harshly, after turning off the tape. "He was there, Tilly. He was there watching your grandfather die."

She clapped her hands over her ears and screamed, "Leave me alone! Just leave me alone! You don't understand! No one can understand. Stay, go, do whatever you want, but leave me alone!"

She ran from the room, and I sat without moving, listening to her footsteps going upstairs, down again, out the front hallway; the front door slammed, and the silence was thicker than ever.

No one's immune, I thought then; everyone has a price, everyone is corruptible if you know the coin of the realm and make the right offer.

I wandered through the old house, her grandparents' room in which one had been born, the other had died. The bed was piled up with clothes, empty boxes on the floor. I found the racks of soap; that explained the

perfumed air. I stood in the doorway of Tilly's room, but didn't enter. Stacks of books, a CD player, a Raggedy Ann doll on a wide window seat.... In the parlor there were science journals, biochemistry, genetic engineering, biology...many of them open, face down, others with Post-it notes like porcupine quills sticking out everywhere. Of course, I thought; she had to catch up with neglected reading. At length I entered Ted Cherny's study, sat at his desk, and surveyed his room. This was where he had written his books, his articles, where he spent his summer vacations working on his quixotic tilt at the mills of nuclear energy.

Two walls with ceiling-to-floor bookshelves overfilled, boxes of books, papers.... Wide windows overlooked the rose garden out back. What I had not yet told Tilly and now wondered if I would tell her, or if I should, was that a message on my answering machine during my busy weeks had been from Val Metzler, who had said in effect that after thinking it over, she had come around to like the idea of a documentary: *The Rise and Fall of the Nuclear Empire*, with the emphasis on the dissidents, the protesters. Had they been right, after all? I had laughed a long time at the message, but I was not laughing now, thinking of Ted Cherny, sitting in his chair.

"Start with him," Val had said when I called her back. "Let's see if there's a story to be had."

I DIDN'T SEE TILLY that night; I heard her come in and go straight upstairs to her room. On Monday I saw her only in the presence of Mrs. Waxman, who said they would finish up later that day. Tilly and I were very polite to each other. I turned down an offer of lunch from Mrs. Waxman, and walked into town later on, as I had done on Sunday, and would do again every day I was there, I had decided. On Tuesday night Tilly came to the door of Ted Cherny's study and said, without entering, "I'm leaving early in the morning. I told Harriet you have a key, and my permission to continue working as long as you need to. She has a key and she'll be in to check on things now and then."

She started to walk away, paused, and said, "Good-bye, Hal. You were very good to me when I needed help. Thanks." Then she walked away swiftly.

TILLY

She couldn't have made Hal understand why she had to do this; she didn't know why she had to do it, but it was necessary. She had seen his hurt and confusion, but there had been nothing she could do about either. She felt just as confused.

In Pittsburgh on Wednesday evening she rented a car and drove to the hotel where the Mandrill Institute had reserved an apartment for her, until she could find her own place, Peter had said when she called him. "Thursday and Friday will be orientation, get your ID, bring you up to date, introduce the rest of the team, the ones you haven't met already, outfit you with lab garb, all that kind of stuff, and on Monday you start working. Okay?"

"Of course."

"And bring the contract."

She said she would and they hung up. Two strangers with nothing to say to each other.

She had an early dinner, and afterward in her apartment she studied the tiny tape recorder she had bought. If Peter was going to be her instructor she would need notes. Although a superlative scientist, he was not a good teacher, not a good public speaker, too restless, too impatient and brusque.

Abruptly she sat on the sofa and thought about Peter, about Mandrill, and after a moment she said under her breath, "It's Peter's work, not his at all." Mandrill had done forensic investigations for years, DNA tests, blood tests, toxicology tests, and then Peter had joined him, and they had gone into research. Besides, when would Mandrill have time to do science? He was always attending conferences, making public appearances, being a celebrity, meeting with his financiers.

She looked at the tape recorder again and realized that it was almost exactly like the one Hal had used, very small, pricey, strong enough to pick up voices from inside a briefcase. And she intended to keep hers in her pocket, out of Peter's sight; if he knew he was being taped, he might become tongue-tied, freeze up entirely, or else rush through everything even faster than usual. She practiced turning her little recorder on and off by touch until she knew it would not be a problem.

First, she had to become familiar with every aspect of the technicians' work, Peter said on Thursday morning. With everyone garbed as if for surgery, it was pointless to try introductions; that would come during the lunch break. Now everyone looked like everyone else: scrub pants, lab coats, face masks, booties, caps low on their foreheads.

The extraction process, the hermetically sealed, environmentally controlled cases with the separated stem cells in vials, the electron microscopes, microphotography equipment.... People monitoring computers that were monitoring everything. She was familiar with everything here, but she listened closely, and repeatedly turned on the tape recorder, turned it off again. This was demanding, exhausting, tedious work, she knew; it was very like what she had done for a year in DNA.

She changed the tape during her break later, and the lessons continued into the afternoon until it was time to leave. Tomorrow, Peter said, they would spend their time in the experimental section. That was where she would be working.

That night she dreamed of her grandmother, of being home in California; she had fallen and scraped both knees and her elbow, and her grandmother was bandaging her wounds, soothing her. Then, magically in the way of dreams, she was the adult soothing her grandmother. "It will be all right," she said. Her grandmother nodded and murmured. "I know. I know."

On Friday, finally admitted to the holy of holies, she saw what the researchers were doing. Some of them looked up at her, and even said a word or two, others didn't acknowledge her presence. One woman was peering through a microscope, her lips moving, counting? She drew away sharply from the instrument and said, "Shit!" She seemed to notice Peter and Tilly then, and she snapped, "I'm going for a walk." He nodded.

When she left her work table, he moved in and looked through the microscope, then motioned for Tilly to have a look. At this level, the cellular level, all human tissue looked pretty much like all other tissue, heart, skin, cornea, they all became just cells, and these cells were obviously dying, shriveling and collapsing.

"Skin," Peter said. "We think we have the code right, but something's missing, or the timing's wrong, or something."

First they regenerated tissue in a Petri dish, he said, then moved up to animal testing, and finally to human testing. Throughout the morning she felt her frustration growing; during her lunch break she took a sandwich and walked in the woods behind the institute and thought about what Peter was actually teaching her, what he was revealing, and it was no more than he would have done with a visiting nonscientist, she realized angrily. Nothing specific, generalities, that's all he was giving her. "We make skin. We make kidneys. See Jane run."

Hold your tongue, she told herself. This was simply orientation, to familiarize her with the scientists, the equipment, get a feeling for the work, the laboratories. On Monday she would start.

She changed the tape in her recorder, although there was little point in doing so since there was nothing of interest on it. And then she was thinking of Hal, what a grand teacher he must have been to make history come alive and be exciting. In his brief remarks about genetics, starting with the pharaonic Egyptians down to the present, he had made it fascinating with his connections. She had said half-jokingly that in her chains of fours time didn't count, but he meant it; in his chains that went back to the dimmest past, time really didn't count. Everything was connected to everything else. Even the mule; she stopped moving, and for a moment she felt disoriented, out of place, as if she had stepped out of the picture frame and was observing herself from a distance. "It will be all right," she whispered, and she started to walk again. It was time to go back.

The afternoon was much like the morning, a waste of time for her and for Peter. At four o'clock Newby's voice came in over the intercom system.

"Peter, could you step out here for a moment?"

When he left she felt abandoned in a crowd of aliens, none of whom she would recognize again. Eyes here, eyeglasses there, white masks, white caps, booties, jackets....

Then Peter's voice sounded, and she heard excitement in it. "Hey," he said, "everyone who can leave what he's doing, get out here. We're to go to Dr. Mandrill's office."

There was an answering murmur of excitement in the lab, and someone cursed and said, "I can't leave!" But most of them could and did.

In the dressing room they pulled off the caps and booties, and Peter said, "It's a come-as-you-are party. Let's go."

In a mass they moved down a corridor, turned a corner and went down another one to Newby's office, where there was a table set up with a white cloth, and buckets of ice with champagne bottles, flutes. Today, standing behind the table, Mandrill was all charm, smiling broadly at them as they entered. Newby opened the bottles, Mandrill poured.

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues," he said, "on Monday we start human testing." There was an excited murmur, applause, laughter. He held up his hand. "Today, just a minor celebration, but I predict that in four months we will have a gala event, a fête without comparison." He held up two of the flutes. "Where is Tilly? Please, come forward. The newest addition to our team, Dr. Tilly Dunning." He handed her the flute. She didn't want to touch the glass, but as little as she wanted it, she wanted even less to make a scene here. She took the flute. "Peter! Get up here. And our first member." There was prolonged, enthusiastic applause as Peter made his way to the table. Tilly edged back as others moved forward.

When everyone had been served Mandrill held up his glass and said, "To the best damn team of scientists ever assembled on this Earth. Cheers!"

They all held up their glasses and called, "Cheers!"

Tilly held up hers as well, but when she lowered it again, she poured the contents onto the carpet behind Newby's desk. Someone choked and coughed, and someone else said, "God, I needed that! We should have this kind of break every day!"

"Remember, friends," Mandrill said then, "absolute silence, not a murmur, not a peep, not a hint. There are a few details to be worked out, but Peter and I will attend to them, and Henry. Where are you, Henry? Can you stay a little late today?"

A man with a receding hairline and a russet-colored ponytail nodded and said, "Yep."

Mandrill laughed. "On Monday, if you can all arrive about fifteen minutes early, Peter will fill you in on the details, and he'll keep you informed every step along the way. Now, drink up, no more work for today. It's a party."

He started to move among them, speaking to someone here, another there, shaking hands, hugging a woman. Tilly shifted her position again and again to keep out of his path, but he spied her and said, "Ah, Tilly, let Newby refill your glass. And in a few minutes I'd like to speak with you in my office. Don't go away."

She felt as guilty as a child caught with her finger in the frosting; she had been working her way toward the door, intending to leave quietly. This wasn't her celebration; these people had been together for years and she was an interloper. She nodded at Mandrill, and he turned to speak to someone else.

It was nearly ten minutes before he beckoned to her. He stopped by the table and picked up a bottle of champagne and two glasses. "You good people party out here, we'll party in there. Come along, Tilly." She followed him into his office. Inside, he motioned her toward a chair near his desk, and she said down silently.

"Ah, Tilly," he said. "Are you comfortable? I want you to be comfortable."

She nodded.

"Good. You see, I should spend at least five minutes with you, possibly even ten minutes, and I want you to be relaxed and comfortable."

"I am," she said stiffly. "I'm fine."

He sat in a nearby chair, crossed his legs and regarded her. "I thought, I really believed we were finished, you and I. I put you through a test and you failed. If you had done exactly what I told you, a cost analysis for one year, then I would have sent you back to DNA, where you would have remained until frustration made you quit. Not too long, I'm sure. I spent years doing that kind of work. I know what it's like. On the other hand, if you pried into the past, which I suspected you would do, why then I could simply fire you outright and be done with it."

"Why?" she whispered.

"Ah, you still have volition." He looked at his watch. "I'm afraid our little chat will have to be for ten minutes. I'll try not to bore you. Why? I'll tell you a story, one which I have never told anyone else. I was very much like our Peter, penniless, on scholarships, and very ambitious. I've given this a lot of thought over the years, what drives people. In most cases, nothing, but for the ones who make a difference there's always one

overwhelming driving force. For Peter it's science, to do good science. He will suffer whatever humiliation he has to endure, whatever rings he has to jump through, simply to work. Strange, isn't it? Your grandfather was driven by honor, the need for redemption, something like that, and he endured whatever the world heaped on him. But the funny thing, Tilly, is that no matter what he did or said, how much of a fool he made of himself, he was respected. Always. I doubt he ever gave it a thought. You're like that, respected whether you've earned it or not, just a given. You saw how that bunch out there reacted when I called Peter's name." He motioned toward the outer office without shifting his steady gaze from her.

"That's what I want, Tilly, not just want, but have an overwhelming need for: that kind of respect, not just from a bunch of working drones, from the whole world. My mother scrubbed toilets, mopped filthy supermarkets, brought home rotten produce and out-of-date meat for our table, and she drank. My father skipped all the middle part and just drank. He died on the street in a drenching rainstorm, too drunk to haul himself home, to shelter. You can imagine how the world treated me, the son of two drunken fools. I worked very hard, Tilly, to leave all that behind. I wanted the world to look at me the way the student body and the other academics looked at your grandfather when he stood up to speak.

"Then he accused me of cheating, of plagiarism, other things. I said I'd leave, go into biology, but he said he couldn't overlook certain activities; it all had to be on the record. I would have been right back in the filthy apartment with a filthy drunken old woman; everything I had escaped was waiting for me."

His gaze swept over her, head to toes, and he said, "I wonder if anyone ever told you how very much like your grandfather you really are. It's in your posture, your attitude, the way you hold your head. It was startling when I met you at Stanford."

She was immobilized, as if hypnotized into a catatonic state. She moistened her lips, and he held up his hand.

"Tilly, I don't want you to speak until I tell you to. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She desperately wanted to jump up, to run away, to cover her ears, do anything except sit there staring at him. She felt as if she were tied to the chair with invisible cords.

"Of course, he came to his office to meet me the night he died. I was desperate, ready to lick his shoes, do anything.... I wouldn't be able to transfer, get another scholarship, continue.... And then he suffered chest pains, staggered, collapsed, and I knew.... Well, not instantly; at first I thought it was my old man all over again, falling-down drunk, but soon, I knew there was a way out. I said I would drive him to the emergency room, and I carried him to my car, actually my mother's car; I couldn't afford a car in those days. Anyway, I took him to Frankie's apartment. He began to struggle, and I had to hit him, not hard, just enough to quiet him, and I took off his clothes and put the key in his pocket, and that's all I did. I didn't touch him again. It was disgusting, to see a naked old man crawling, dragging himself on the floor, making baby noises. Just like my father, I kept thinking. Just like him. Who could respect him like that?"

He glanced at his watch, then turned his steady gaze back to her. "Just a few more minutes. Timing is very important this afternoon. So, to get back to my little story, when I met you, it all came back in a rush: the anguish, humiliation, anger, fear. Helplessness. To be at the mercy of that old man, to be helpless was more than I could bear.

"Later, after you failed your little test, I thought I was done with you. You would experience an echo of my pain, my helplessness; that was enough. But circumstances change."

He was glancing more frequently at his watch, impatient now. "And there's the problem of our dear Peter." He smiled faintly. "He seems to think the work he has done here is his, but of course that's wrong. Every idea, every experiment, every thought he has belongs to the institute, and I am the Mandrill Institute. He's no more than my employee. He's very ambitious, you know; even if he doesn't give a damn what the world thinks of him personally, he still wants his work recognized. He seems to believe that when the Nobel Prize is handed out we'll share it equally. A mistake. It will be all mine."

After another quick glance at his watch, his voice became brisker. "Nearly there, my dear Tilly. As I said, circumstances change, and I had to send my employee out with a golden carrot to fetch you, and the solution to both of my problems came to me in a flash of brilliance. Do you know what rohypnol is?"

She nodded.

"Do you know the street name they gave it? You can tell me."

"Rape drug."

"Or roofies, but that's good enough. A few years ago at a conference it came up in a discussion about the amnesia it induces, the permanent, irretrievable loss of short-term memories, and the mechanisms that can cause such losses. It's a simple compound actually, gamma hydroxy butyrate; any bright high-school chemistry student could put it together. I did myself, and I tinkered with it a little. Twice now I've tried it out on my darling Stephanie. We had the most delightful evenings; she did things she had never been willing to do before, and has no memory whatever of any of it. As I said, I tinkered a bit, modified it a bit. The amnesia is different with my customized drug. It erases everything from ten minutes ago. A great improvement, I think. There would no longer be any need to take your date out to the countryside and abandon her there. Within ten minutes the slate is clean. Isn't that a clever modification?"

He stood up, then laughed. "Don't shrink back like that. I have no intention of raping you. Although I could. The drug not only cleans the slate, it reduces volition to zero. A perfect hypnotic. On your feet now, Tilly."

She rose from her chair. He was between her and the door; she couldn't make a dash for it. Not a sound penetrated from the outer office. If she screamed would anyone even hear her?

"We'll just walk around to the other side of the desk. The view from that side is inspiring."

He took her elbow and she felt panic rising, an adrenaline rush that made her heart race. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "I'll just help you to the desk. Your little part is so small, almost insignificant, but necessary." They went behind the desk, where he moved his chair out of the way. "See? All I want you to do is stand there and look around for a moment, relish what it means to own all this." He stood at her side, holding her wrist, gazing about as if relishing the view. His gaze lingered on the platinum double helix model. "Nice, isn't it?" he murmured. "Relax, Tilly."

Now! she thought. She had to scream, to pull away, to run, but then she distinctly heard her grandmother's voice: "It will be all right," and the panic and fear vanished; she felt as if she had withdrawn to a distant place from which she could watch herself, watch him safely.

"Good," he said, releasing her. He opened a drawer, then pulled on latex gloves. "Have you ever fired a handgun?" he asked as casually as if asking if she drank water.

"No."

"I thought probably not. At first I planned to let you do the shooting, but I decided that was not a good idea. You might even miss altogether. On the other hand, I am an expert marksman. So your part was reduced to even less than nothing. You simply stand there, and when I put the gun in your hand, you continue to stand there and don't move until someone comes and takes it away. Simplicity itself. Afterward, you might babble a little, even accuse me, but by the time the police arrive you'll have no memory of our little conversation, or this little playlet. And the police, I imagine, will find it hard to believe in such a convenient lapse of memory."

They wouldn't hear a shot from the outer office, she thought; if they heard anything they probably would assume he had opened the champagne. He would have time to finish setting his stage. She could give him a shove, she thought, as he pressed the intercom button and asked Peter to come in, but he might turn the gun on her, say they wrestled for it or something. From her removed place it seemed that there was time, everything had gone into slow motion. Mandrill's hands were below the desktop, out of sight of anyone entering. Peter entered the office and closed the door behind him.

"Peter, duck!" she yelled, and at the same time she picked up the beautiful platinum double helix and swung, catching Mandrill's arm just as he raised his hand and fired. She raced around the desk, a dreamlike sprint in slow motion. Peter had stopped walking at her scream; he staggered backward, and dropped to the floor. She reached the door and yanked it open. The gunshot had sounded like a cannon to her, but when she opened the door, the party was continuing. It became a tableau when she cried out, "Help! Call nine one one! He shot Peter!"

Everyone began moving at once, all in slow motion; two people dropped to their knees by Peter, who was groaning. She heard Mandrill's voice, "She was hysterical. She shot him. Restrain that woman, don't let her leave!"

Someone took her arm and shoved her down into a chair.

"He'll be all right," someone else called. "But we need an ambulance."

Mandrill repeated what he had said, "She shot him."

Then she heard Peter's voice, faint, hardly above a whisper: "You son of a bitch."

The nameless man guarding her moved slightly and she could see Mandrill at the side of his desk, watching her fixedly.

"I didn't drink the champagne," she said. "I didn't even taste it." Her voice carried as if they were the only two people in the room.

All at once there were no individual voices, just babble; time resumed its normal flow, and she began to shake.

HAL

Harriet Waxman called me shortly after six on Friday evening. "Mr. Whitcombe, turn on the news! They're saying Tilly shot a man!" She was so excited and hysterical that I couldn't understand a thing she was trying to tell me. I turned on the news and at the same time dialed my travel agent in San Luis Obispo. I watched the newscast, stunned by what they were saying, that Tilly Dunning, daughter of Congresswoman Marsha Dunning, had shot a coworker during an office party at the world-famous Mandrill Institute.

I left the house at three in the morning in order to be on standby for a flight to Pittsburgh....

At six-thirty on Saturday evening, at the Pittsburgh airport, I called the police to find out where Tilly was. I had learned from a late newscast that Tilly had been cleared, that Mandrill was being accused of attempted murder. I was shunted back and forth like a tennis ball, but eventually a lieutenant said she would call Tilly and ask if she wanted to see me. She took the number of the pay phone and I waited. When she called back she gave me the name of the hotel and Tilly's room number.

"Don't ask for her at the desk," the lieutenant said. "The press is there in force."

At seven-thirty I knocked on Tilly's door. A heavyset man opened the door a crack. "Do you have some ID?" he asked.

"Hal Whitcombe," I said, and pulled out my wallet, but I didn't need it.

"Hal!" Tilly cried. "It's Hal! I told you he'd come! Let him in."

The man opened the door enough for me to slip in and then shut and locked it again. "Bob Dunning," he said. We shook hands. "My wife, Marsha," he said, nodding toward her. She was a beautiful woman, with the same sea-green eyes that Tilly had, and dark hair streaked with gray on one temple. Tilly had said her mother exulted the day she discovered a gray hair; it would give her dignity, she had announced. And it did. Tilly had also said that there would never be more gray than she had now, she would see to that. Her face was flushed, and Tilly's face was equally flushed.

"They want me to have a press conference," Tilly muttered.

"You have to face them," her mother said. "Or plan to stay holed up here for months. They'll wait, you know."

"They'll die of old age before I have a press conference."

I looked at Tilly. "Are you free to go?"

"Of course, she's free," Marsha Dunning snapped. "She hasn't done anything except eyewitness a murder attempt. She's a hero. She saved Peter Kromer's life."

"I came to take you home," I said to Tilly. "Do you want to leave?" She nodded.

"They'll just follow you," Marsha said impatiently. "They'll be on your heels constantly."

I walked to the window and gazed out, thinking. It was a hot day, still sunny and bright, but day or night wouldn't make any difference. That pack of reporters, video people, photographers would be there whenever she left. I had seen them in the street outside, and had no doubt there would be more just like them at the other entrances, at the exits from the underground parking lot.

On a table by the window were the hotel directory and brochures. I looked in the directory for the layout of the building. Three underground parking levels; I had parked a rental car on Level One. Several dining rooms, cafe, lounges...swimming pool on the roof, three stories up. That's it, I thought.

Marsha was going on about duty to the public, and I walked past her and Tilly and opened a door to the bathroom, where I spied one of those great terry cloth robes, and big fluffy white towels.

"Okay," I said, interrupting Marsha, who was explaining how simple press conferences really were. "Now listen. I think I know how we can work it."

Marsha rolled her eyes expressively and shrugged.

"Do you have a bathing suit with you?" I asked Tilly. She shook her head. "Right. I'm going to the pool accessory shop and buy you a few things, including the biggest beach bag I can find. While I'm gone, call room service and order dinner for three to be sent up. You call, Tilly, and turn the phone over to your mother after you start ordering. I want them to know you're up here, that you're having dinner. No doubt, they've bribed some of the help to keep them informed. You get started on that, and I'll be back in a few minutes. Okay?"

Tilly's eyes were shining and she nodded, and I left them. When I returned I had everything I had set out to get.

Bob Dunning said, "Mr. Whitcombe, you can't sneak her out, you must realize, and it would be worse than ever and possibly dangerous to have them running after her, taking pictures of her trying to shake them."

"She can preserve her dignity if she simply meets with them," Marsha said.

Tilly said, "Will you both just shut up and let him tell us what he wants us to do. We ordered dinner. Now what?"

"This is the scenario. You get into the shorts I bought you, wear the robe from the bathroom, wrap a towel around your hair, and go up to the pool. It's only three flights up. Walk up. Pack what you'll need for a day or two in the beach bag, shoes, your purse, whatever you'll really need before we can go shopping. Take a compact. You have one?" She nodded. "Good. And a lipstick."

They were all listening intently; Tilly nodding now and then while both her parents simply looked impatient and frustrated.

"I'm going to go to the bell captain and demand that he page my daughter Brook Lowry who is up at the pool. I'll ask him where the pool elevator is, and he'll direct me to it. Look, I'll show you." I showed her the elevator the pool guests were supposed to use in order not to drip on the other guests' finery. "As soon as you hear the page for Brook Lowry, grab the beach bag and hightail it to the elevator and hit the Level One Parking button. I'll be waiting for you, a furious father collecting his wayward,

rebellious teenaged daughter. Smear a lot of the sunscreen on your face, wear the sunglasses, the reddest lipstick you have, and sulk. As I drive out, hold the compact up and be putting on more lipstick. Can do?"

"Can she sulk?" Marsha said sarcastically. "She invented it." She was examining the things I had bought, shorts, thongs, sunscreen, oversized sunglasses with dayglow yellow frames.... "It might work," she said after a moment. "Purloined letter effect. March her out under their noses, right before their eyes."

"You've got it," I said. "And if you and Mr. Dunning could hole up here overnight, tomorrow issue a statement that she has gone into seclusion, exhausted from shock, something like that, it would be helpful."

Now that Marsha had accepted the idea, Bob Dunning became the practical one. "Honey," he said, "give me the key to the rental car and the papers. I'll take care of that. And anything you leave here, we'll send on. Do you have money, cash? How long do you expect to take to get home?"

Tilly looked at me and said, "A couple of weeks? I don't want to hurry. By then a new story will have come up and I'll be yesterday's hot item. And I don't have much cash, just credit cards."

Bob Dunning already had his wallet out.

IT WORKED. I made a wonderfully loud and abusive irate father, and she was a perfect sulky teenager. People averted their faces at my tirade. As soon as we were out of the city, I took an exit from the interstate highway.

"Where are we going?"

"I don't know. Generally west."

"Have you ever been through the Canadian Rockies?"

"No. Have you?"

"No. What about Vancouver, B.C.?"

"Never been there. Hear it's a beautiful city, though. Want to flip for it? Heads we go by way of Canada, tails...Canada?"

"Consider it flipped," she said.

Then she told me about it. "They thought I taped him deliberately, that I let him talk on and on and recorded every word on purpose. I didn't. I told them I had forgotten the tape was running. I really had forgotten. I

never gave it a thought until early this morning, three, four in the morning. Something like that."

"You gave the tape to the police?"

"Yes. But Dad made copies first. He said they would cut a deal with Mandrill, the tape might never surface again. Peter had already given the police his statement and that part was all right, although Mandrill is still denying everything. He said I was hysterical, Peter had been drunk, and no one's statement could be trusted; they were all drinking champagne and were unreliable. He would have hired the best lawyers, gotten away with it, I suspect, but I had that tape. Dad slipped out and made three copies. He and Mother kept one; he mailed one to you, and one to me back home. We told the police we had copies, so their tape can't just disappear. Mother will demand a reopening of the investigation of my grandfather's death, clear his name."

So the baboon was dead in the water, I thought, but I didn't much care at the moment. There were more immediate concerns. Tilly was a mess, her face shiny with the sunscreen oil. She had wiped off a lot on the towel, and smeared the garish lipstick doing it, but she needed a good scrub, and she was still wearing the hotel bathrobe and thongs, and heaven only knew how much or how little under the robe. Also, I was famished, and probably she was, too. And we were both exhausted.

Before I could bring up our immediate problems, she said in a low voice, "There's something else I have to tell you." She drew in a long breath, then said quickly, "I don't believe in reincarnation, or ghosts, or possession, or predestination, multiple alternate universes, none of it. But Grandmother believed in alternate universes."

She told me about the talk they had had about an infinite room with infinite doors to infinite moments of time, all *now*, past, present and future, all happening now. And she told me what Marsha had said, that Tilly's grandmother had been crazy after Ted Cherny's death, and her transformation when she held Tilly the first time.

"That was a dream you had," I pointed out. "All that talk about time came from you, not from her."

"It was almost verbatim from what she had said before," Tilly said quietly. "We argued about it, and she said we, people, were not ready yet to grasp what time is, what it means, so we make a construct that lets us

concentrate on what's happening today, or regretting yesterday, or anticipating tomorrow. Any more than that is too frightening. She said what we call now is just one of yesterday's tomorrows."

I made a rude noise, and would have challenged such a nonsensical system, but Tilly was speaking again.

"I think she caught a glimpse of an open door," Tilly said softly, "and through it she saw Mandrill and me, all those white coats, and it brought her peace. Every choice I made, every decision had to be exactly what it was for this future to happen; I had the illusion of freedom, but she knew where we were going. She left me the house because she knew I had to have someplace to go back to where I could work."

"Tilly," I said, "what she believed, and what you've done with your life aren't part of some predetermined —"

"Wait," she said. "Let me finish. I rationalized and justified everything. I was going back for the work, that's all that mattered, the work. But, Hal, I took only enough with me to get me through a few days. I didn't make any arrangements about shipping things, about turning off the electricity, anything else. I didn't give it a second thought. I kept telling myself that I was going for the work, for the research. The police kept asking why I didn't simply tell Mandrill that I wasn't drugged, that I hadn't touched the champagne, and walk out. I told them I didn't know why, but in truth, I felt entranced, immobilized just as if I had been drugged. I felt that time had come to a stop almost, seconds lasted an eternity, everything was in slow motion. Then, afterward, it was as if bonds had been cut, I was released."

Almost in a whisper, she added, "I don't think Grandmother's vision went beyond that moment when I faced Mandrill and told him I wasn't drugged, and he realized that Ted Cherny's granddaughter would destroy him. He knew, Hal. I was looking into the face of a dead man. That's what my grandmother saw, white coats, Mandrill, me...that sequence, those moments."

I couldn't think of a single thing to say. I couldn't believe that a mad woman's hallucination had foretold, much less been responsible for, anything that had happened, including my part in Tilly's life. I couldn't believe it, and I didn't believe it, and would never believe it, and unaccountably I felt angry, but at the moment I could not come up with a

plausible rebuttal. Besides, I didn't want to think about it, or talk about it any longer. I began to wish I knew where we were, just so I could go somewhere else.

"You said you needed a place to go back to work," I said finally. "What does that mean?"

"Did you see those journals in the parlor?"

"I saw, and even tried to read some of the articles. I got lost pretty fast."

"You're meant to get lost. Arcane knowledge for the elite only. After you left, while I was alone in the house, every once in a while I recalled what you said about researching genetics, tracing the modern horse from eohippus, and you said, 'even the poor old mule.' I'd think of that and become disoriented for a few seconds, as if I'd found myself in the wrong place, or outside the frame looking in, something weird. Then the journals came and I began to go through them. I hadn't enough time for years to catch up."

She paused, then said matter-of-factly, "I can read them, and I understand them. I've had the training, the education; I know what they mean, what they're doing. Genetic engineering. GM, genetically modified. Did you know the United States has approved fifty varieties of GM seeds? England, for instance, has not approved a single one yet, and they don't want to. Insecticides introduced to the germ plasm, fungicides, modifications to make them more able to survive varying temperatures. Terminator seeds. They have to be planted within a year or they're no longer viable, and the seeds they produce, if any, are sterile. Just like the poor old mule. A dead end. But pollen won't stay where you want it to. Wind, insects, birds, shoes.... It gets moved around, mixes with other pollen. Do you know what all that means?"

I suspected that the passion that had come into her voice, the anger and outrage meant that she had glimpsed her own future: Cassandra crying out in the wilderness. Or maybe not, I thought; maybe another *Silent Spring*. A line from Ted Cherny's notebooks came to mind: *Knowledge before wisdom most often leads to disaster*. "It means," I said cautiously, "that you're going to write articles or even a book."

"You bet your sweet patootie." Then almost plaintively she said, "Do you think we could find our way off this country road to a highway with

the possibility of following it to a place where there are motels and maybe even food?"

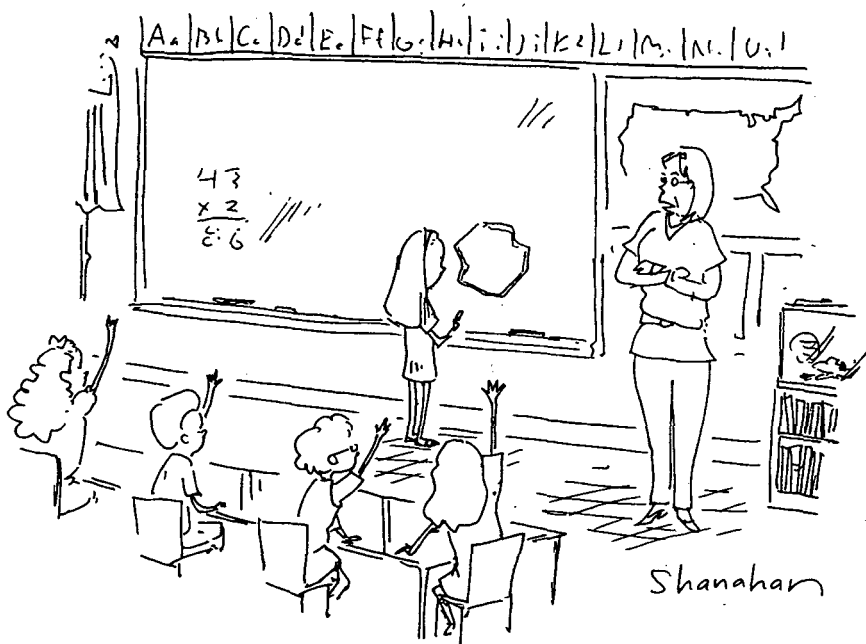
"Help me watch for road signs." I hadn't seen one for miles.

"When we rejoin civilization," she said, "I'll stay in the car and let you register for us."

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. "It's going to be tough, finding two rooms this late." It had grown dark, after ten. The dashboard lights turned her white robe into a fluorescent cloud, reflected eerily off her shiny, smeared face; her eyes flashed green when she looked at me.

"Think of all the money we'll save if we don't have to pay for two rooms," she said.

That was when the car turned into a magic carpet. ♣



"Can anyone show Amy how to make a proper magic pentagram?"



KATE WILHELM: AN APPRECIATION

GORDON VAN GELDER

AS IF IT'S A violation of client/lawyer confidentiality, people generally consider it bad form for editors to write appreciations of the writers they edit. State secrets might be revealed, mistakes made, working relationships can get damaged.

However, since Kate Wilhelm's photograph has appeared under the definition of professionalism in my book — and has been fixed there for more than a decade — I felt an exception could be made. I've been hankering to write this piece since I first interviewed for the job of *F&SF* editor in 1996. You're not going to stop me now.

Besides, by having worked at Bluejay Books and then at St. Martin's Press and now here, I've been in a unique position of reading all the reviews for Kate's books, of hearing many people's thoughts on the woman and her works — so I think I've got an inkling of just

how much her work has meant to people.

I've taken the phone calls from writers who say they owe it all to Kate. I've lunched with editors who complained that the new Kate Wilhelm novel isn't in their favorite series (and by the way, this one editor doesn't *really* see herself in Barbara Holloway's relationship with her father). I've had top-rank writers ask me *sotto voce* what strings we need to pull to get SFWA to name her a Grand Master. I've had several writers quote me verbatim the words Kate used when she touched on the key element in their writing while critiquing their work. And I've shared moments with other professionals when they've put aside any suave facades and admitted that one story of Kate's or another brought us to tears.

I like to think this gives me some authority in calling Kate Wilhelm well-loved.

Let me start by confessing that I have not read every work of Ms.

Wilhelm's. My hunt for her elusive¹ third novel, *The Nevermore Affair*, only recently bore fruit. Other books have sat patiently on the shelf, abiding. There is a strong sense in Kate's work that things have their proper times and places; it does not do to rush, so I do not rush. *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* I have not reread; the fourteen-year-old kid who found it at a garage sale in Norwood, New Jersey, expects that it will be better on the next reading, but I can't help feeling that some djinn of my youth might fly away when this particular bottle is unstopped. The proper time will come.

The stories I have read — two dozen novels out of three, perhaps eighty of a hundred stories — say a lot about Kate Wilhelm. Her women are not afraid of being smart, not afraid of being themselves, but often they find life kaleidoscoping uncontrollably around them. Her men are strong enough to show their love. Heroes rarely need to use force; villains tend to be people who aren't honest with themselves. Human behavior and the physical world both pose mysteries worth solving. One need not span the globe to find good stories. Kate's characters

generally prefer to dig their fingers into the soil they call home, and they like the feel of dirt and hard work. Good food should be savored, life need not be led in quiet desperation, at the highest level of heaven awaits a fresh pot of coffee.

Perhaps you'd like a cup now?

Katie G. Meredith was born in Toledo in 1928 and to her credit, I've never seen her make an attempt to hide this date. She and her brothers and sister grew up in Kentucky. She married fairly young, had two sons with Mr. Wilhelm before the marriage fell apart. Here's her author bio from 1962, when her first novel was published:

Kate Wilhelm wrote this novel between the hours of 9 P.M. and midnight, when her two children were in bed. Cleveland born [sic], she has spent most of her life in Kentucky. She has been an insurance underwriter, long-distance telephone operator and professional model. Her interests include astronomy, spelunking, hypnotism, lapidary work and fishing. At present she lives in Milford, Pennsylvania, where she is at work on her second novel.

¹A book dealer once told Kate that several of her books were too scarce to qualify as "rare."

The accompanying photo shows a dark-haired woman with startlingly clear eyes looking off-camera with a gaze that might be termed visionary and a trace of a smile on her lips to make Mona Lisa jealous.

You'll note the author bio mentions that she lived in Milford at the time. As many readers of this magazine already know, her home there was a big Victorian house called the Anchorage that she shared with her second husband, a writer and critic by the name of Damon Knight.

The reason so many readers are aware of this fact is because Kate and Damon hosted passels of writing workshops there. I can't recall for certain if they met at a workshop, but as far as the history of science fiction is concerned, they might as well have. By way of writing groups in Milford, in Clarion, Pennsylvania, and eventually in Eugene, Oregon (their home for the past three decades), Kate and Damon have consistently surrounded themselves with vibrant literary communities — they've practically raised contemporary American science fiction.

The Milford days in particular have attained a status approaching myth: the players include most of sf's leading lights (Judith Merril,

Virginia Kidd, Ted Sturgeon, et cetera and et cetera). The stories and anecdotes, such as the group-mind incident that inspired *More Than Human* (recounted by Damon in *The Futurians*) loom larger than life. Recently I had the privilege of viewing a short film that Ed Emsh made in Milford entitled *The Monster from Back Issues*. The spoof starred Damon, Algis Budrys, and Ted Cogswell, among others. Viewing it at David Hartwell's house with Emily Pohl-Weary (Judy and Fred's granddaughter) gave me the extra sense of watching an old film of the collective science fiction family.

A few more words about the writing workshops are in order here. In *A Pocketful of Stars*, Kate wrote about her first workshop experience: she turned in an ambitious story and had it shredded. The man sitting next to her turned in some trivial fluff and got gentle, kid-glove critiques. After the workshop drubbing, Kate went down to the nearby stream and threw rocks at the water as hard as she could, until she realized her fellow workshopers treated her story firmly because they respected her and felt the story had potential. I recount this incident every time I'm in a workshop and almost every time I speak with

someone who has been in a workshop. In fifty years, the anecdote may well be a twentieth-century tale of Hera's entry to Olympos.

Since that first workshop, Kate has hosted hundreds. She and Damon helped Robin Wilson found the Clarion workshops and for more than twenty years they taught the final two weeks. I saw Kate in action once, about ten years ago, and marveled at her ability to analyze a story and gently but firmly bring out the weaknesses in a constructive manner. It is no wonder that writers can quote her twenty years later. It is no wonder that the roster of writers she helped foster includes such luminaries as Kim Stanley Robinson, George Alec Effinger, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Robert Crais, Nicola Griffith, Lucius Shepard, and dozens more. In the year 2000, all four winners of the Nebula Award for fiction were former students of Kate's.

But a great teacher is not necessarily a great writer and it's rare to find both skills in one person. Kate is a lifelong student of the craft of fiction, which probably helps explain the path of her career. She began selling stories to the sf magazines in the mid-1950s and, as the accompanying bibliography shows, was selling rather steadily to a vari-

ety of sf magazines. Her first novel, *More Bitter Than Death*, was a mystery. Clayton Rawson, her editor, said that if she stuck to one genre, Kate would become a best-seller...but Kate told me, "I couldn't do it." Those many interests in her bio notes (which, in truth, only scratched the surface) would take her in too many directions.

Having come to the early work late, I have to admit that I haven't found it as engaging as the joys to come. I was struck by John Campbell's comments to Kate in a 1957 letter:

You have an easy, pleasing and readable style, one that would, moreover, be a marked change in science fiction. However, your stories have rather hazy, gentle motivating forces behind them — which, while that too is somewhat different in science fiction, is not quite so desirable a difference.

Ah, I thought when I encountered this letter in the first volume of Campbell's letters. Here at once is what she brought to the field initially, and perhaps a reason why the early work doesn't compel me.

With history to show, it's easy to say now that Kate's work didn't

blossom until the mid-1960s, when the New Wave opened up the sf field to more experimentation. In particular, an anthology series known as *Orbit*, edited by none other than Damon Knight, gave her a place to experiment. (I think the fact that many of Kate's stories feature scientists with experiments gone wrong — or right — reflects her own interest in testing out new approaches to storytelling.) Kate went on to publish a score of stories in *Orbit*, including masterpieces like "The Infinity Box," "The Encounter," and the original novella of "Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang," firmly establishing herself as a top-flight writer. Her novels in this period moved away from the more conventional sf elements and began exploring new psychological territory — books like *Margaret and I* (pity that John Campbell never got to experience the motivating forces in this one) and *Fault Lines* went wherever the story took them, regardless of genre conventions.

"The problem with labels," wrote Kate in 1975, introducing *The Infinity Box*, "is that they all too quickly become eroded; they cannot cope with borderline cases." The borderline cases tend to be the ones that interest Kate, and the deception of appearances is a con-

sistent theme in her books, especially the Barbara Holloway novels.

By the mid-1980s, when I first got to work with her, Kate had started writing the Constance and Charlie mysteries along with romantic comedies such as *Oh, Susannah!* and *Crazy Time*. In 1990, she blended chaos theory with the legal thriller in *Death Qualified* and had her biggest commercial success to date. (State secrets revealed? Here's one: during the negotiations for *Death Qualified*, Kate said the reason she'd parted ways with her previous publishers had always been because she wrote a book the editor simply didn't get. I ask you, what's not to get in a novel that's partly a whodunit, partly a courtroom thriller, partly a science fiction novel about chaos? Labels do indeed erode.)

Never one to repeat herself or write the same book over again, Kate surprised everyone when she found that Barbara Holloway, the lawyer heroine of *Death Qualified*, offered her the best way to tell another story. Here's how Kate described it in 1994:

I was convinced that I had finished with my character Barbara Holloway when I completed

the novel *Death Qualified*, and I was surprised when she kept coming to mind in various scenes for which I had no story. I wasn't even trying to imagine her in a real situation much less a novel again, but there she was, a presence in my mind. One image of her in particular was maddening in its persistence: she was standing on a cliff overlooking a small cove, speaking to the ocean. But I didn't know what she was saying.

Then, while on vacation, I met a young woman who began to talk about her problems with a younger brother who was mistreating her, hitting and slapping her. She had an answer for every suggestion I offered. She can't defend herself; he is much bigger than she is. She can't complain to her parents; they take his side and the attacks become more vicious. She can't leave; her brother and her father would make her mother suffer the consequences. Then she said her father had brutalized her mother for as long as she could remember, and her mother is stuck because she has no place to go, no one she can turn to, and she has no skills to earn a living by herself.

In four months, Kate wrote *The Best Defense*. The anger that sparked the book does not typify all of Kate's work, but I mention it because it represents the passion that goes into her fiction. People frequently dub Kate Wilhelm a feminist writer because her books often feature strong women characters and often deal with women's issues, but I've never seen Kate as writing to any particular *ism*. She writes about the things that are important to her; be the subject the over-medication of the mentally ill, a woman's right to choose, or something as "simple" as the matter of love, she brings wisdom and passion to bear in depicting it.

There is also extraordinary intelligence at work in her fiction. One of Kate's mystery novels hinges on the use of the "morning after" abortion drug, RU-486. Half a decade later, I was in an editorial meeting in which a mystery using the same plot element was being touted as the next big commercial thing, and I realized once again how often Kate grasps a new concept, turns it over and around, and holds its flaws up to light before most people have even recognized it for what it is. Small wonder her stories seem to be ahead of their time so frequently — twenty-five years

before "Survivor" hit the TV screens, she practically predicted it in "Ladies and Gentlemen, This Is Your Crisis."

Before I get carried away and take over the bulk of this issue, let me restrain myself to a few more points:

- The role of family in Kate Wilhelm's work is an essay in itself (if not an entire book) — her portraits and studies of siblings, married couples, and children are assured and perceptive. One critic told me he saw Constance Leidl and Charlie Meiklejohn as stand-ins for Kate and Damon, but I find the resemblances superficial. It's definitely true, however, that family plays a big role in Kate's life as well as in her fiction — in fact, she collaborated with her son Richard on one book, and note whose work graces the cover of this issue.

- Another state secret: the last part of a story Kate usually writes is the title. People in the sales department at St. Martin's didn't like the title *Death Qualified* and threatened to rename the book *The Butterfly Effect*. (These included some of the same people who felt that *The Silence of the Lambs* was a weak title.) Kate's working title for the novella in this issue was "What

Color Were Leif Ericson's Underpants?"

- In high school, Kate took an employment aptitude test that told her she was meant to be an architect. Before you laugh, think of how prominent a role buildings play in novels such as *Smart House*, *The Good Children*, and *Cambio Bay*. If you ever get the feeling that you could find your way around one of the houses in Kate's books, that might be because she draws maps of the major locales for her books while she's working on them.

- At one point, I found myself hard-pressed to identify what literary traditions fostered her fiction — for someone who is so very widely read, Kate Wilhelm's work strikes me as being very independent. Then I sat on a panel at an sf convention in Ohio in which we discussed what (if anything) characterizes Ohioan fiction. Maureen McHugh and the others (including Ron Sarti and Juanita Coulson) very eloquently summed up the characteristics of what Maureen dubbed "heartland" fiction — modest, independent, suburban fiction that's far more interested in average folks than in supermen. I cited Leigh Brackett and *The Long Tomorrow* as a prime example...and I find that Kate Wilhelm's work fits in this

tradition. Somewhat. Hers is not fiction that can be pigeonholed easily.

In that mordant way of his, Barry Malzberg said that he went through a period of reading lots of writers' biographies until he realized they all follow the same pattern: early struggles, followed by a big success, after which there's the long slow descent into despair and substance abuse. There's plenty of truth to this observation, but let's remember too that this romantic model sells books far better than does the story of someone who devotes

herself to craft, who favors nurturing to self-destruction, whose drug of choice is caffeine, and who manages to spin out yarns year after year that amuse, enlighten, entertain, and entrance. Such writers might not get the obsessive fascination that belongs to the live-fast-die-young victims, but every now and then, at times like this, we can try to tell writers like Kate Wilhelm just how grateful we are for all the joy they've given us and how much we look forward to the stories yet to come...and we can hope that's enough. ♣



"How come you never surprise me anymore?"



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"Grass" marks Lawrence Miles's first appearance in our pages, although he notes that he has previously published work in various anthologies, magazines, comic books, and computer games. His recent work includes a board game concerning Imperial Rome and a British TV script.

"Grass" ruminates on American history and what might have been...

Grass

By Lawrence Miles

"Only in the context of a *totality* of the sciences do Jefferson's achievements make sense. This would for instance explain the apparent contradiction of how a man now famed for his contribution to the political sciences...[was also] purportedly the first westerner to fully reconstruct the remains of a prehistoric mammoth. It's more the failing of an over-enthusiastic age than of the man himself that Jefferson seriously believed such antediluvian beasts could have survived until the 1800s in the wilds of the unexplored midwest...."

— D. P. Mann, *The Worlds of Thomas Jefferson* (1958).

IT STARTS WITH THE President of the United States of America, although we should be clear on exactly what kind of *gentleman* we're discussing here. Sitting behind the Presidential desk (rosewood, as it happens, and very nice too) is a man whom later generations will call a polymath, a statesman-philosopher, a true product of the enlightenment. Oh yes, this particular President is a *creator*, with a

portfolio that begins "We, the people" and works its way up to a big climax from there. He's also a man who distrusts priests of just about every denomination, which explains much of what's about to happen here: he's got a lot of time for the divine, this one, but mere mortal authority figures get his back up like nothing else on God's Earth. Now, we can't be sure that what we're about to see in this room is *bona fide* true, because the affairs of the President are traditionally left behind closed doors, and there are some rules even we're expected to follow. But we can put the scene together out of the pieces we know. Call it listening at keyholes. Call it history by degrees.

Mr. Jefferson — Mr. President — sits behind the aforementioned desk, in front of a vast window that looks out onto a garden of grass and cat's-ears, a garden quite specifically designed so as to in no way resemble the three million square miles of hostile territory beyond it. The light's flooding through the window onto the parquet-and-polish floor, while the President himself is leaning over the books with which he surrounds himself (this being a less literate time, however, "surrounds" makes the number of books involved sound greater than it really is), reaching for his little box of joy. The box is small and off-white, a gift from a visitor whose exact name and purpose Mr. Jefferson can't quite recall: he seems to recollect that it was a woman, probably French (he has no difficulty remembering this, as he's had a head for Frenchwomen ever since a certain remarkable incident in a brothel in Paris...this is another story, and not the only "another story" which will be intercepting us today). History doesn't record what he keeps *inside* the box, though as we've imagined Mr. Jefferson as a free-thinking nineteenth century gentleman it could be anything from snuff to hashish. Let's give him the benefit of the doubt, and assume it's chewing tobacco. Undignified as it may seem.

"It has to be done — it *must* be done — it is our duty," he says, as he starts picking at the box's contents. He talks the way he writes, with far too many hyphens and pauses, and he's addressing the two men standing on the other side of his desk. "If we're to claim these lands for the good of our nation — if we're to prevent them being overrun by jackals and opportunists — if we're to have room in which to breathe, and not fall upon each other as they do in Europe...."

Now, it so happens that Mr. Jefferson's domain has recently grown, thanks to a certain land deal which is not only due to increase his running total of United States, but which will also give him vast tracts of what he believes to be lush and verdant farmland, possibly including that mythical easy route to the Pacific. And the two men who now stand in Mr. Jefferson's office, nodding in solemn agreement, will go down in history as the first men to travel into the heart of this new terrain: or the first to take notes anyway, which is the way history works. Their names are, from left to right, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. As expected.

(This is all quite ridiculous, of course. At least one of these men already belongs to the President's inner circle. If Jefferson wants to brief them on their mission, then he's more likely to do it in a cozy drawing room with a bottle of Cognac, swapping stories as Lewis lounges on a chaise longue and Clark leans nonchalantly against the fireplace. But how can we resist imagining it this way? The two of them standing to attention before the Presidential desk, being instructed to journey into the dark heart of the Northwest and bring the land under control. No doubt you're already imagining these two great explorers, these two grizzled veterans of the wilderness, walking into the President's office dressed in furs and racoon-skin hats. We need to believe they're going to step out of the briefing and, without even pausing for breath, stride off into the jungles of uncharted America. Such is history.)

Mr. Jefferson is telling the explorers that nobody can say for sure what they'll find in the Northwestern territories. The French who sold him the land have hardly been forthcoming, and the Indians aren't likely to be much help either. The President expects every form of terrain imaginable, from the tropical to the simply peculiar. He's read the greatest naturalists of the age. He has plans to meet with Alexander von Humboldt himself. He's even heard the theories of the Englishman Frere, who claims to have found human remains which blatantly defy the book of Genesis, something Mr. Jefferson greatly appreciates. Oh, yes indeed. As an enlightened gentleman, the President knows the *terra incognita* Lewis and Clark will find is no Biblical wasteland. It's to be an altogether more rational landscape, filled with all the wonders that biology and geology can produce. A new world, untouched by Church dogma, governed only by the laws of Nature and Nature's God.

This is the point when Mr. Jefferson tells Lewis and Clark about the mammoths. Oddly — seeing as most of this patchwork conversation will be lost to posterity — the part about the mammoths is the one thing the history books *do* record.

IT STARTS WITH the President, but in purely chronological terms the briefing in the office isn't the first thing to actually *happen*. Just look at this landscape, for example. Nothing behind-closed-doors here. The sky's a color which later generations will be unable to imagine as anything other than a kind of paint, a deep blue, a *dark* blue, that makes the green, green grass look as though it's glaring in the sunlight. The air's fresh, pre-industrial fresh, the kind of fresh you only get once it's been filtered through the lungs of several million herd animals and a couple of dozen Indian tribes (this is as fresh as nature gets, no doubt about it). The grass clings to the slopes, sticks close to the curves of the land, so the green's only broken up by the dirt-paths where animals have left their scents behind them like breadcrumb-trails. And mountains? Oh, there are mountains. Just waiting on the horizon, looking as if they'll *always* be just waiting on the horizon, wherever you stand on the surface of the Earth. Perfect idyll. Perfect Montana.

Timeless, we'd say. But from the President's point of view, we'd have to call it the past. Months before the briefing of Mr. Lewis and Mr. Clark, the white race has already set foot in the Land of the Shining Mountains. Here she comes now.

Her name's Lucia Cailloux, and at this moment she's running bare-foot through the grass, up the side of a slope which seems to have been put there just to warn travelers that the Rockies will be starting soon, and that they'd better get used to moving uphill. An observer would point out that Lucia — whose manner of dress is unusually masculine, but then, that's probably what you'd expect from someone who's spent so much time talking to damned heathen Indians — is technically wearing *boots*. But that's not how it feels to Lucia. No, she can feel the warm, warm earth between her naked toes, because in her head she's suddenly become an eight-year-old. As a twenty-year-old woman in the service of her government, this is hardly what she's being paid for, but right now her superiors

are more than eight thousand miles away and Lucia can't help but feel she's going to get away with it.

You see, right now she believes she's *going* somewhere. When she was young, she once ran all the way up the Rue Viande, something of an achievement when you've got child-sized legs and no shoes, because the Rue Viande is a perfect slope and the sheer amount of dirt on it (in those days, anyway, before Napoleon started cleaning it all up) made the road feel like mud in the summer. On that day — running all the way to the tannery, right at the highest point of the street, where the skins were strung up like flags at the top of the world — the junior Lucia could feel the whole world cracking like glass behind her, with the wind ripping through her dirt-blond hair and the sheer speed (all of, oh, two miles an hour) tearing at her little dress. And as she headed for the tip of that slope, she knew — *she knew* — she'd look down and see something big and wonderful on the other side, as her reward for running all the way. She knew she'd see the whole world, in all its truth and majesty. The face, if you will, of Nature's God.

She was right, as well. Young Lucia always *was* a perceptive little witch.

Now the older Lucia, barefoot and booted, knows the same thing. She can quite literally smell it on the wind. At the top of the slope, she stops, so this is the point when we finally see her face in closeup. Dirt-blond hair ragged around her shoulders, pasty little freckles blistering in the sunlight, the pupils in her big, big eyes getting smaller as she brushes the last few drops of sweat and sunshine away from her forehead. It doesn't really matter whether we're looking at Lucia *now* or watching the eight-year-old flashback version, because as it turns out her hair's naturally dirt-blond in color. Twelve years after the Rue Viande, even a clean Lucia looks that way.

Lucia can hear her co-traveler, the Indian, thumping his way up the slope behind her. He calls out to her: "*Quelque chose!*"

And Lucia calls back: "*Tout.*" (But that's pretty much the last time we'll be hearing her words in their natural spoken tongue.)

So the world spins around us, vertigo-wise, until we can look down on the great grass-covered crater beyond the slope. The dimple in the world, where Nature's God herself has reached down and left a whacking great

fingerprint on the landscape. A gentle pit, with slopes of green sunning themselves in the midday heat, letting troughs of rainwater simmer and merge on their skin.

And there at the bottom of it all, the mammoths.

Now Lucia finds herself running again, and for a moment she isn't sure whether it's *now* her running or *then* her, until she remembers that on the Rue Viande she never went down the other side of the slope. At the bottom of the basin, the mammoths are grazing. It'd be almost abstract, like seeing drawings of fluffy brown clouds on a painted backdrop, if it weren't for the smell.

(Of course, when the eight-year-old Lucia stood on the *other* slope, the view was quite different. What she saw was a cartload of corpses, blocking the street while the horseman stopped to flirt with one of the local girls, as if having a cartload of corpses was some kind of aphrodisiac. But then, that was the Revolution for you. *C'est la vie*, as they say everywhere except Paris.)

That smell's starting to bother Lucia now, because she's remembering the smell of dung on the Rue Viande. She's so busy separating the horse-smell from the mammoth-smell that she doesn't even realize how far inertia's taking her. Gravity drags her to the bottom of the crater, then keeps her going, so before she can think about it she's stumbling over the ridges where the beasts have chewed and trampled away the grass. Pity the poor woman. The second most momentous moment of her life so far, and all she perceives is a series of confusing, ragged-edged images. The red-brown blurs that she knows are impossible animals. The smears of green that mark the walls of the crater, plastered with spoor and crushed plants: and is that a baby there, a baby mammoth, a little smudge of hair trying to stick close to its bigger smudge of a mother...?

This is when things get slightly out of hand. It's when Lucia turns, nearly falling arse over tit in the process, and finds herself staring at the absurdly huge shape which is even now bearing down on her. The bull-mammoth weighs just over seven tons, not that Lucia will ever know it, and when rising up on its hind legs (as it is now) it must be all of fifteen feet high. When it raises its trunk, and opens its mouth, and flexes its massive lungs, you know it's quite capable of destroying anything that threatens its own stomping ground.

Nonetheless, the first thing Lucia does when faced with this monstrosity is "protect" herself by putting her arms up in front of her face. And they call this the Age of Reason.

There was an Indian. You might have forgotten about him.

He's now standing on the crest of the slope, watching the great beast rear up over the woman who's nominally his employer, though as a product of a non-market culture the Indian considers this "employer" business to be a pile of deershit. The Indian's name (for our purposes, anyway) is Broken Nose, which is not, of course, a "real" Indian name. It was given to him by a group of Frenchmen with especially fat faces, and it was earned after a confrontation at a French trading post, during which — predictably — the Indian broke a French official's nose. The friends of the unfortunate fat-faced man, being typically European, found this amusing. Being very typically European, "Broken Nose" was their idea of irony. It's apparently supposed to sound like an authentic Indian title, although Broken Nose himself considers it just a good excuse to punch future fat-faced men without them being surprised. Besides, his original Shoshoni name was even more embarrassing.

It has to be said, Broken Nose doesn't have a great interest in the aesthetic. Below him are creatures the American settlers would find unbelievable, which would probably trigger a religious spasm in the Catholics or the Jesuits whom Mr. Jefferson distrusts so much. However, Broken Nose simply finds the beasts stupid-looking, wearing thick wool all over their bodies despite the sunshine. Broken Nose is *slightly* concerned for his "employer," but he's well aware that she can look after herself.

On the first night of the expedition, when Broken Nose and Mademoiselle Cailloux made camp on the trail from Louisiana — where the Frenchwoman had arrived under the name of "Lucy Pebbles," and bartered for supplies in what sounded to the Indian like a perfect local accent — the two of them talked at length. Or as much as was possible, anyway, given that Broken Nose had been taught French by men who only needed to prime him for certain tasks. Without any due modesty, Broken Nose showed Mme. Cailloux the scar which had been ritually inflicted across his inner thigh (*not* by his own tribe, but that's another "another story").

And with less regard for her integrity than Broken Nose would have expected from a European woman, Mme. Cailloux bared her torso from her neck to her waist, revealing a scab left by a bullet which she claimed *should* have killed her, by all the known laws of Nature and science. This began a discussion about the great wars in Europe, about the little tribal elder called Napoleon and the weapons he could muster: guns like those Mme. Cailloux herself carried, but grown so large that they needed huge boats of their own. Broken Nose asked why the Europeans always insisted on fighting with each other, and that gave the Mademoiselle pause for thought.

"Your people fight, don't they?" she said.

Broken Nose told her that this was indeed the case.

"Then why do you do it?" the woman asked.

The obvious answer was "because you tell us to," naturally, but Broken Nose suspected this was missing the point. The reasons seemed to him to be to do with territory, with possessions, with differences in gods....

"No," said Mme. Cailloux. "We fight to stop the other tribes becoming *whole*."

Broken Nose didn't understand that. He still doesn't, although Mme. Cailloux has assured him that he will, before their mission here is complete. That is, if she doesn't get herself killed by the bull-mammoth.

In all probability, it's impossible to describe how it feels to have a mammoth rearing up over you. Maybe it's like the feeling you get when you lie on your back and watch the stars, and for a moment — *just for a moment* — you suddenly realize the true size of what you're staring at, as your brain suddenly forgets to force your usual scale of perception onto things. Maybe. It might be interesting to ask Lucia, even though she has even less conception of the distances of stars than the rest of us (but she's probably wise enough to know that Uranus, the furthest-flung of the seven planets, is seventeen hundred million miles farther away than she'll ever travel).

For the record, the mammoth *isn't* going to trample her to death. But looking up at the beast now, seeing its great brown-black outline framed against the perfect blue, Lucia feels she's watching the very countenance

of Nature's God. As with the cart of corpses on the Rue Viande, it's the little details that really bother her. The strands of crushed grass on the bottom of its big round feet. The curve of its maw, the upturned V-shape that she knows could swallow a man, if not whole, then certainly in no more than *two* mouthfuls. The chips in its tusks, tiny imperfections in arcs of ivory so long that no matter which way she turns her head, she knows she won't be able to see both tips at once. And then there's its breath. Its terrible and ancient mammoth-breath, washing over her as the animal bellows into her face (one of those things Lucia's never considered until now, and which she's sure the academics who study the bones of these beasts have never considered either).

Yes, these are the things Lucia has trouble coping with. So many little creases and flaws, more than she could catalogue in half a lifetime, let alone in the raw seconds she believes she has left. The beast's stubby-but-oh-so-big front legs pedal the air in front of its body, and then it suddenly finds itself falling.

It doesn't push itself forward as it falls. It doesn't, as it were, *attack*. It drops to the ground in front of Lucia, not on top of her, and the impact would surely crack the Earth open if the ground here weren't so used to the abuse. This is the way a bull-mammoth warns off the opposition. Lucia's realizing that even as she peels her heart from the roof of her mouth and tries to stop herself falling over (noticing, as an incidental detail, that the smell of sweat which is starting to blot out the dung-scent is *hers* and not the fault of the herd).

The bull-mammoth is exhausted. It's not a creature built for rearing up on its hind legs, and the only conclusion we — like Lucia — can reach is that it expects strangers to be so intimidated by its mass that it doesn't actually need to follow up the threat. Having made its point, having bellowed its great beef-heart out, it can't do anything more than stand still and get its breath back. Lungs the size of fat children inflate and deflate, inflate and deflate, under a heavy pelt that must be home to entire empires of insects. From four feet above her head, those huge black eyes are staring down at Lucia, as if the thing's daring her to try anything else.

Easy to call it the face of Nature's God. So big, so blatant, that we can only assume it's been put there for a purpose. Which it has, as Lucia well knows. *All* animals are there for a purpose. Horses are for riding, pigs are

for eating. As far as she's concerned, the mammoths are here as a kind of metaphor. These are *political* animals, hence Mr. Jefferson's interest.

(You must have been wondering, for example, where this herd originates: woolly skins and elephant-blubber hardly seem to fit in around here. The best explanation we can hope for is that a number of mammoths were once the property of Catherine of Russia, she who was known as "The Great" before some idiot in her court started spreading that God-awful story about the horse. Horse or no horse, Catherine had something of a reputation as a witch...a label applied to most efficient female rulers, it's true, but even before her death there were fabulous and revolting stories about the company she liked to keep, and the animal rites they used to perform. Horses for riding, pigs for eating, trained monkeys for ritual. It's not entirely clear what the link is between the Empress of Russia being a witch and the existence of live mammoths here in what will one day be the State of Montana, although Lucia has heard it said, with maddening vagueness, that one can easily lead to the other. History is full of these logical gaps. Certainly, it's rumored that one such hairy beast was given by Catherine as a gift to George III of England, but that George — half-crazed brute that he was — destroyed the thing in a fight with pit dogs without even realizing its value. Lucia is secretly of the opinion that if Russia had given such a gift to the French, they probably would have eaten it.)

But Lucia's mammoth just keeps gasping. It's vulnerable now. With its show of strength over, it's got nothing to protect it but its dignity. Gravity has *not* been kind to these creatures, which probably explains why they're ripping up the grass on the crater floor when there are so many nice fresh trees just a couple of hundred yards over the rim. So when Lucia takes a step forward, the mammoth doesn't even blink: it's impossible to imagine such a blink being anything but a major task, and taking anything less than an afternoon to complete. From the look on its face, we could almost believe it's *indignant*.

How can we help but try to read its expression? If the mammoths were put here as metaphors, then we can read them any way we like. It's hard not to find meaning in something that big.

There's a stillness now, Lucia regarding the mammoth, the mammoth regarding Lucia. It's only once Lucia has paid her respects to the

silence that she raises her hand. The trunk is close enough to touch, and touch it she does. Her fingers run through the tiny brown hairs, across the leathery old skin, over the wrinkles and the patches of dirt. She almost expects the beast to flinch, or to purr like a cat.

It's vulnerable, anybody can see that. Now, and only now, Lucia gets her one big chance to touch the impossible.

THIS IS WHAT PASSED between Mme. Cailloux and Broken Nose that morning, after they pulled themselves to their feet at dawn and began the final trek to the place of the mammoths:

Mme. Cailloux spoke of a man called Jefferson, the leader of the colonists who lived off in the eastern lands. Mme. Cailloux explained to Broken Nose that her own tribal leader, Napoleon Short-Arse, had agreed to *sell* a portion of the land to the aforementioned Jefferson (a notion which, like the "employer" idea, Broken Nose finds profoundly stupid).

"We're afraid," said the Mademoiselle. "All of us. Your people. My people."

Broken Nose told her that his people weren't afraid of anything, which was, in his experience, what the French expected to hear from a stupid Indian.

"There's a saying in Europe," Mme. Cailloux went on. "'The other man's grass is always greener.' We fight for territory. We start wars to acquire the other man's land. Why?"

Broken Nose shrugged. "More room. For cattle."

"No," the Frenchwoman told him. "It's because we think...we secretly believe...that the other man's land is a paradise. We start to believe there are great secrets there. Secrets we have to know for ourselves. And when we take the land away from him, and we find there's no paradise there...then we tell ourselves it was the *other* man's kind of paradise. Not ours. You understand?"

"Your people are stupid," said Broken Nose. (Not entirely true: this is what he believes he said, *after the fact*, although his training in the French tongue doesn't cover the possibility of him insulting his "employers." In his head, *after the fact*, he hears the words in his own language.)

"Perhaps," he imagines that Mme. Cailloux said. "But it's a matter of

warfare. In war, we attack the enemy's resources. If an enemy has supply lines, we cut them. If an enemy has a better kind of weapon, we rid him of it."

This sounded to Broken Nose like the first sensible thing she'd said.

She went on to explain many things which Broken Nose had either no understanding of or no interest in. She told him, for example, that in the possession of Napoleon Short-Arse there was a length of metal, which purportedly came from a weapon that had been used to cut the flesh of one of the white man's gods "while he hung on the cross," this metal having the power to induce divine visions (of the spirit-world, Broken Nose guessed) in anyone who was scratched by it.

"Imagine such a thing in the power of the Vatican," the Mademoiselle said, although Broken Nose had no idea what marked these Vatican out from any of the other European tribes. "The relic would prove them correct. It would show them to be justified in all their beliefs. Thus would their grass become greener, and their state grow stronger. They might even become *whole*."

"Whole?" queried Broken Nose.

"I saw the Revolution," replied Mme. Cailloux. "I know what happens when people get what they want. Or when they *believe* they do."

None of which told Broken Nose anything remotely useful, or even explained the woman's mission to find the mammoths before the land gets passed on to Mr. Jefferson. But now, in what we have to call the *present*, Broken Nose is trying not to trip over his skin-shod heels as he tumbles down the slope of the crater. Up ahead, he can see Mme. Cailloux, facing the largest of all the mammoths (or is it just the closest?). He can see the woman resting her hand on the monster's trunk, and he can see the beast keeping quite still, something which his fellow Shoshoni would probably take as proof of the foreign witch's powers over the animal kingdom. But Broken Nose has little time for the wonders of nature, and sees her only as being lucky.

He pulls himself to a halt as the ground levels out under his feet, stopping just a few yards from the bulk of the bull-mammoth. Its eyes are fixed on the woman, and it makes pained groaning noises when it breathes. Slowly, and with some reluctance, Mme. Cailloux lowers her hand.

"*Tout*," she says. (This is the original French, of course, but somehow it makes more sense that way.)

Broken Nose isn't really sure where he should look. It seems disrespectful, somehow, to disturb this union. There they stand, woman and monster, in a communion that would seem almost obscene if it weren't so unlikely. For some reason, Broken Nose remembers a folk tale from his childhood about a father who had an improper relationship with his daughter, and who was swallowed up by the Earth as a punishment. After a few moments more, he speaks.

"The cargo," he says, using a word he's more than familiar with even though it's not entirely the right one. "Our tools...."

It's then that Mme. Cailloux regains her senses, preternatural or otherwise, and turns away from the beast. The mammoth never blinks, though, and never moves its head. The Mademoiselle looks up toward the top of the slope, presumably remembering the packs which she and Broken Nose have left over the rise, the equipment her own "employers" issued her before transporting her here to the Land of the Shining Mountains. (And just as we imagined Lewis and Clark standing to attention before Jefferson, so Broken Nose imagines Mme. Cailloux standing before Napoleon Short-Arse himself, although he's imagining Napoleon sitting in a position of honor around a roaring fire rather than sitting behind a desk: there is, of course, no Shoshoni word for "furniture.")

So it is that Mme. Cailloux draws away from the mammoth, to begin her slow climb back up the slope, with Broken Nose at her heels. Mme. Cailloux doesn't look back at the mammoth as she walks, something Broken Nose interprets as an almost incestuous shame. And the mammoth doesn't watch her go, simply continuing to stare at the spot where she once stood. So it's left to Broken Nose to glance over his shoulder on the way up the slope, to watch the woolly monster recover its strength after its four seconds' worth of rabid activity, while the rest of the herd-animals go on bellowing and sniffing at each other. He wonders if the bull-mammoth even understands the difference between its human visitors and the other beasts of the wilderness.

"These are Mr. Jefferson's animals," he hears Mme. Cailloux say, halfway up the rise. "They feed on Mr. Jefferson's grass."

He *still* doesn't know what she's talking about. Broken Nose is starting to feel that even the mammoths understand this mission better than he does, but then again, wouldn't you expect him to think that way? Being Shoshoni, when *he* uses the mammoths as a metaphor the results aren't particularly literary.

Which leads us back to the President of the United States of America himself, as he sits behind his rosewood desk in his rose-tinted office, picking snuff or hashish or chewing tobacco out of his little carved box. This is some months in what might be called Lucia's future, so Lewis and Clark have in the last few minutes dutifully marched out of the office in their unlikely racoonskin hats. No doubt a kayak is waiting for them outside.

But now Mr. Jefferson's alone with his thoughts, and we can make the usual array of guesses as to what those thoughts might be. The President is hoping that his explorers will bring him back news of a Northwest Passage, a trade route that could turn his republic into an empire almost overnight (not that he *wants* an empire, as such, but...well, you know how it is). And then, of course, there's the prospect of mammoths. If such things are found, they're sure to be given a place of honor in the new American mythology. He briefly wonders if there's room for a mammoth on the national crest: possibly he can put one in place of the eagle. A beast which proves, by its very nature, that the Church is full of asses and the world runs to the will of the new sciences. Just for a second, for a stupid childish second, he imagines riding the back of such an animal in a parade along Pennsylvania Avenue, celebrating his second — oh, to hell with precedent, make it his third — term in office. Jefferson's monsters, that's what the Church would say. He imagines the mammoths' backs being draped in flags, decked out in the red-and-white stripes and the seventeen stars (although the flag which hangs above the window in this particular office only has sixteen, those artisans who handle such things being a little slower than the expansion of the new republic).

All this makes Mr. Jefferson consider the box again. He tries to remember the name of the woman who presented it to him, the well-spoken Mademoiselle who appeared in this very office just a few short months ago, her skins and furs making her look like an Indian coming

home from a trek in the great forests. Naturally, it's ludicrous to think that a complete stranger, and such an ill-dressed one, should be allowed to stroll into the Presidential office without even officially presenting herself...but the notion's as hard to resist as all the other things we've seen inside this virtual room. Whether or not the woman *did* introduce herself, the one thing Mr. Jefferson can remember is what she told him when she placed the little off-white box on his desk.

"Your new world, *Monsieur President*," she said. Well, maybe she didn't say "mister" in the French style, maybe Jefferson's just remembering it that way because he likes the accent, but the point remains that when he slid the box open he found inside it just a few blades of green, green grass. Mr. Jefferson fails to remember how he responded to this, or even whether he asked his visitor to explain herself: she may well have vanished from his office before he could so much as speak (after all, a mysterious entrance should always be complemented by a mysterious exit).

Here and now, the President believes the contents of the box to have been a kind of message, sent by some agency he has yet to identify. In fact, he's only half-right.

And this is Jefferson's future. More precisely, this is 1805, halfway through Lewis and Clark's two-year excursion into the wildlands, the point at which the two men (and all their followers, though right now they're gloriously irrelevant) finally stumble across a certain indentation in a certain grassland. A crater, if you will. It's here that the two explorers, being consummate outdoorsmen, find trampled ground and traces of spoor which suggest the trail of some grand animal herd. At first they conclude that the Indians have driven their cattle through the area, though this theory falters when they arrive at the bottom of the basin, where the graves have been dug. They *assume* there are graves here, anyway, given that the ground's been broken from one side of the crater to the other. Now, as not even the Shoshoni would do something as bizarre as grazing their animals on top of their dead — and as a quick search of the area uncovers European shell-casings in the grass — there's obviously some kind of mystery here.

Sadly, it's not one the explorers feel they have time to solve. Besides,

even by this stage they're starting to learn that digging up native graves is a bad move, tactically speaking. There's some discussion about what might be called the "central" grave, the fifteen-foot-long tract of broken earth which, from its size, must surely indicate the last resting place of a great leader (proving to the leader-obsessed white men that the people who performed these burials must have been *partly* civilized, even though the Shoshoni contingent in the expedition claims not to recognize the style). Lewis and Clark steer well clear, deciding to give the mysterious fallen chief the respect he must surely deserve.

Later, in the oh-so-short years between the end of the expedition and Lewis's highly dubious suicide, the duo will theorize that the site was deliberately desecrated by rogue Frenchmen as some kind of political maneuver. A stampede must have taken place at some point, so the large animals, whatever they may have been, were probably used by the French as weapons of destruction.

Like Jefferson, these people excel at being only partly correct.

And however far into the future we go, Mr. Jefferson, President of the United States of America, fails to understand the significance of any of this. Well, what can we expect? Polymath and philosopher he may be, but he doesn't even understand the significance of the box. The little off-white box which remains in his possession for the rest of his term in office, a gift from one of the very few people who understood exactly what he wanted from his glorious new territory, and knew precisely why he couldn't be allowed to get it. A box Mr. Jefferson might have used for snuff, or hashish, or tobacco, which a Frenchwoman once claimed was all that remained of his virtual paradise, and which just happened to be made out of ivory.





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Ill Met by Moonlight, by Sarah A. Hoyt, Ace Books, 2001, \$21.95.

FIRST UP this month is an entertaining historical fantasy by newcomer Sarah Hoyt featuring William Shakespeare and Anne "Nan" Hathaway in their twenties.

Ill Met by Moonlight starts out when Will discovers that Nan and their daughter Susannah have been stolen away by the fairies — a local court already in turmoil.

One member of that court is Quicksilver, able to appear as a man or as a woman named the Lady Silver. He considers himself the rightful heir after the murder of his parents, Oberon and Titania, yet it's his brother Sylvanus who has taken the throne. Worse, to Quicksilver's way of thinking, he believes that Sylvanus had their parents murdered, using a human to do the deed. So it seems right to Quicksilver that he will do the same

to rid the court of Sylvanus, and he goes looking for a human equal to the task.

Which is when he meets young Will, pining for his wife and child. Will has tracked them to the fairy court, but while he can see them inside the court, he isn't able to reach them. Quicksilver, in the guise of Lady Silver, forms an alliance with Will and, needless to say, things only go downhill and get more complicated from that point on.

There's a little overwriting in the prose, as can sometimes be the case with a newer writer — although to be fair, the version I read wasn't the final one that will see print. Nevertheless this is an enjoyable story, full of great bits of historical and fairy lore, with a likeable cast and inventive use of traditional motifs and folklore. Perhaps the most fun, as the plot unfolds, is seeing where Will gets the ideas for the plays he will later come to write.

American Gods, by Neil Gaiman, William Morrow, 2001, \$26.

Let's get this out of the way first:

I'm sure a large number of Gaiman's fans (who came to his prose by way of his excellent work on *The Sandman* and other comic book projects) are otherwise unfamiliar with the fantasy field. They'll think that the underlying conceit of *American Gods* — that immigrants, however unknowingly, brought over with them the beings from folklore and myth who are now living hidden amongst us in North America — is terribly original. But it's not. We've seen it many times before, admirably handled by everyone from Roger Zelazny to, well, Mark Wagner, creator of the comic *Mage*.

Now before anyone protests, I know that Gaiman is aware of this as well. One of his characters even talks about something very like it in the book itself, though that character is referring to peoples' lives when he talks about "...the repetitive shape and form of the stories. The shape does not change: there was a human being who was born, lived, and then, by some means or another, died. There. You may fill in the details from your own expe-

rience. As unoriginal as any other tale, as unique as any other life."

Fantasy, though older, is often considered to be the mentally disadvantaged younger sibling of science fiction, which prides itself on being "the fiction of ideas." But let's face it, new ideas are far and few between in any sort of fiction these days. The thing that's important is what the author does with an idea, and in that sense Gaiman has done a superb job, proving in the process (if it should be required after such successful books as *Neverwhere*) that he doesn't need an illustrator to bring his fascinating characters and stories to life.

American Gods is a big, sprawling book that seems to take forever to get to its point, but what a wonderful journey it is to get there. We enter the hidden world of forgotten gods through the viewpoint of a character named Shadow whose life, after three years in prison, seems about to take an upturn. But that wouldn't make much of a story. So in short order, he's released a day or so early from prison because his wife has died, while cuckolding Shadow with his own best friend. The job he was supposed to have (as fitness trainer with said best friend) is now also gone.

Enter Wednesday, a rather

enigmatic figure whose true nature we figure out before Shadow, and all too soon poor Shadow is drawn into a struggle between the forgotten gods (brought over to North America by their believers and then abandoned) and the new gods: the gods of technology, of cell phones and the Internet and every other modern contrivance. And along the way he needs to find some meaning and balance to his own life, one that for all its emotional ups and downs it seems he's been living by rote up to this point.

There are few authors who can manage to balance the light and dark aspects of a storyline as effectively as Gaiman does. There are charming, utterly whimsical moments here, and others filled with doom and dread. The mythic characters are earthy and accessible without losing their godlike stature. The plot, while rambling, never strays into uninteresting territories and, more to the point, most of the seeming asides and subplots prove, once we reach the conclusion, to have been necessary to the principal storyline after all.

Another pleasure of reading Gaiman is that he has such a light touch with his prose. One gets the impression that it simply flowed effortlessly from his mind to the

book we hold in hand, though that, of course, is one of the hardest tricks to pull off in the business of writing.

It's still early as I write this (the beginning of April), but it wouldn't surprise me if *American Gods* proves to be the Big Book of this year. It'll certainly be difficult to match in its paradoxical mix of broad scope and small intimacies.

The Quotable Sandman, by Neil Gaiman, Vertigo/DC Comics, 2001, \$9.95.

And speaking of *The Sandman*, five years after the last comic hit the stands, the publishers are still finding new ways to repackage/extend the product. We've had trading cards, resin statues, action figures, stuffed toys, jewelry, watches, an in-depth guide to the series (*The Sandman Companion* by Hy Bender), a prose sequel of sorts (*The Dream Hunters*, Gaiman's collaboration with Japanese artist Yoshitaka Amano), an ongoing spin-off comic (*The Dreaming*), an anthology of Sandman stories by other authors, co-edited by Gaiman (*The Sandman: Book of Dreams*), and even a collection of the covers of the complete run of the original series by Dave McKean (*Dust Covers*).

Now we have this little gift book, repackaging art from the series with, if I may quote the cover, "memorable lines from the acclaimed series."

Do we really need this? No.

Is it fun to read? Without question. And illuminating, as well.

What gave credibility to *The Sandman* comic was how so often its small truths and little jewels of consideration and conversation resonated with its readers. A perfect example is how often you'll see a quote from *The Sandman* in the .SIG file of someone's e-mail.

Now granted, choosing one's own quotes is always more meaningful, but I like the way the art and words in this little book call back entire storylines for me. They range from the whimsical, such as a classic bit of *Delirium's* stream-of-consciousness:

"Have you ever spent days and days and days making up flavors of ice cream that no one's ever eaten before? Like chicken and telephone ice cream?... Green mouse ice cream was the worst. I didn't like it at all."

To Death's matter-of-fact statement made, perhaps, that much more iconic since in the series she ap-

pears as a small, dark-haired, pale-skinned Goth:

"I'm not blessed, or merciful. I'm just me. I've got a job to do, and I do it."

To the matters thought-provoking, as in this conversation at the wake of Dream:

"Nobody died. How can you kill an idea? How can you kill the personification of an action?"

"Then what died? What are you mourning?"

"A...point of view."

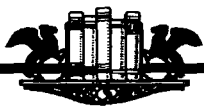
No, we don't need this book, but nevertheless, it's fun to have, and pretty as well, in its small size with all the wonderful art from the likes of McKean, Kent Williams, Rick Berry, Charles Vess, Michael Zulli, and too many others to mention them all.

And at the price of a paperback, it's a bargain to boot.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ¶

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter, by Jack Zipes, Routledge, 2000, \$24.95.

Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller, by Jackie Wullschlager, Alfred A. Knopf, 2001, \$30.

The Treasury of the Fantastic: Romanticism to Early Twentieth Century Literature, edited by David Sandner and Jacob Weisman, foreword by Peter S. Beagle, Frog, Ltd., 2000, \$27.50.

ANARCHY IN THE PRE-K

MAYBE IT'S just me, but I find it impossible to contemplate the notorious and iconic image of Der Struwwelpeter adorning the cover of Jack Zipes's brilliant, moody *Sticks and Stones* and not

think of Joey Ramone. For those unfamiliar with Struwwelpeter (I will assume everyone recognizes the beloved and equally iconic figure of Joey, dead this Easter at the age of forty-nine), he is the quintessential and terrifying, monstrous Bad Boy, frozen for all time at the front of the classroom while the teacher — Auden's "terrible rector," perhaps? — points at him and declaims:

Look at him! There he stands
With his nasty hair and hands!
See! His nails are never cut:
They are grimed as black as soot,
While the sloven, I declare
Not once this year has combed his
hair!

...Anything to me is sweeter
Than to see Shock-headed Peter.

Struwwelpeter, translated as Shock-headed Peter or Slovenly Peter, is the most outstanding visual image in the book named for him, a red-clad boy with an immense

corona of ragged orange hair, arms and legs akimbo, his hands ending in foot-long clawlike nails. First published in Germany in 1845, *Der Struwwelpeter* was written by Dr. Heinrich Hoffmann, who had been chagrined to find nothing suitable as a Christmas book for his three-year-old son. As Zipes recounts with a storyteller's deceptively low-key delivery,

"...the more he looked in the Frankfort bookshops, the more discouraged he became. The books were too sentimental, didactic, or boring. So he bought a notebook, composed five stories in verse, and sketched pictures in color."

I can recall reading *Struwwelpeter* as a child (in English, though it retained the German title): the most perverse aspects of the entire volume were its subtitle — *Merry Stories and Funny Pictures* — and introductory verse, which informs us that only good children will receive this "pretty Picture-Book." Because one glance inside, and you know this is *not* a pretty Picture-Book at all, but a child's version of Octave Mirbeau's *Torture Garden*, irresistible and awful and hilarious, the single most powerful children's

book I can think of; the literary equivalent of a ticking bomb. Both a parody of popular Victorian children's books promoting good behavior, and itself a tongue-in-cheek guide to proper manners, *Struwwelpeter's* verses depict the horrors of misbehaving at the dinner table ("Fidgety Phillip"); cruelty to animals ("The Story of Cruel Frederick"); racist bullying ("The Story of the Inky Boys"); not finishing your supper ("The Story of Augustus Who Would Not Have Any Soup"); and best (that is, worst) of all, the book's two most famous cautionary tales, "The Dreadful Story of Harriet and the Matches" and "The Story of Little Suck-A-Thumb."

The copy of *Struwwelpeter* that I grew up with belonged to my five boy cousins. It had been their father's, and for all I know, *his* father's; certainly the book was ancient and well-worn. When my brothers and sisters and I visited them, the first thing we would do was race to pull the book out from where it was kept hidden under the bed — hidden not because it was a forbidden book, but because it was incendiary and frightening. Then we would read it aloud, screaming with laughter at the "pretty pictures" — Harriet burning to death! Fat Augustus starving to death! Dog

Tray biting Cruel Fred's leg! But best of all was "Little Suck-A-Thumb" (since there were several among us who did), with its admonitory Mamma —

"Mind now, Conrad, what I say — Don't suck your thumb while I'm away.

The great tall tailor always comes
To little boys who suck their thumbs;
And ere they know what he's about,
He takes his great long scissors out
And cuts their thumbs clean off,
— and then
You know they never grow again."

Hapless Conrad, of course, can't resist; and there are few images more mesmerizing than what follows, as

"The door flew open, in he ran:
The great, long, red-legged scissor-
man."

This, of course, was when we screamed — and laughed — to the point of hysteria; even the picture of poor Conrad, his thumbless hands dripping blood, was anti-climactic. I have never, to my knowledge, dreamed of the great tall tailor (or sucked my thumb); but to this day I cannot bear an open door in any room where I am sleeping. You can't be too careful.

Jack Zipes devotes only a single chapter to *Struwwelpeter* in *Sticks and Stones*, but the wild-haired, anarchic spirit of Slovenly Peter is a ghostly presence in the book nonetheless. Zipes, Professor of German at the University of Minnesota, is perhaps the world's foremost contemporary authority on fairy tales; he has translated the complete fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, edited the indispensable *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, and written works like *Don't Bet on the Prince*, *Should We Burn Babar*, and *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry*. He is also, importantly, a parent, and much of his rage against the devouring machine that is our commodification of childhood stems from his own experience as a father in the "wilderness" of American society.

All of the nine essays in Zipes's masterly and provocative book deal with the troubling state of children's literature in the United States; its absorption by the Culture Industry and subsequent distribution as product, in the form of toy, movie, TV, music, clothing, computer and gaming tie-ins. This commodification is ubiquitous and almost certainly unstoppable, except at the most basic grass-roots level ("No,

Mommy is *not* going to take you to the Harry Potter movie!"), and Zipes's refusal to become resigned in the face of this inexorable tide of pure shit is admirable, if a bit exhausting, as is his ambivalent attitude toward children's literature itself.

In *Sticks and Stones* Zipes is no doubt preaching to the choir, but he's doing it in style — more than once I found myself thinking of Harry Powell, the demonic preacher played by Robert Mitchum in *Night of the Hunter*, who has LOVE tattooed on the fingers of one hand and HATE on the other. Zipes's essays, with titles like "The Cultural Homogenization of American Children," "Why Children's Literature Does Not Exist," and "The Value of Evaluating the Value of Children's Literature," are serious without being humorless, and wonderfully free of the postmodern babblelogue that distinguished much academic writing in the late 1980s and 1990s. The two final essays in the volume, however, because they focus on the particular and not the general, are

the most powerful. "The Perverse Delight of Shockheaded Peter" is adapted from Zipes's introduction to the Feral House production of *Struwwelpeter*,¹ and contains a compelling analysis of the unforgettable British musical play *Shockheaded Peter*,² which has played to critical acclaim and SRO crowds in London's West End.

Zipes's attitude toward both the play — which he terms "a radical psychodrama" — and the book which inspired it is ambivalent. He sees in *Struwwelpeter*'s perverse appeal "a critical reflection about the desperate manner in which we seek to script and control the painful irrationality and traumas of childhood." What he doesn't stress enough is the power that *Struwwelpeter* and other disturbing books possess to help children to seize some of that anarchic power for themselves and, one hopes, channel it creatively. There is a remarkable anecdote in Marina Warner's *No Go the Bogeyman*, in which she recounts finding a copy

¹In addition to Zipes's scholarly introduction, the 1999 edition published by Feral House includes a facsimile of the 1915 American edition of *Slovenly Peter*; "Struwwelhitler," the famous British WWII parody; and Sarita Vendetta's disturbing and very adult interpretation of *Struwwelpeter*.

²I was fortunate enough to have seen *Shockheaded Peter* in London earlier this year; it has also toured extensively in the U.S. If the opportunity presents itself, see it; if not, the CD of the original music by The Tiger Lillies is available online at Shockheadedpeter.com.

of *Struwwelpeter* that had been "vigorously defaced" by a child, the frightening pictures scribbled on, torn out, while

Here and there, clumsy scissor cuts had slashed into the pages, where the blades, too heavy in the child's hand, had closed crookedly, under their own momentum.... On the final endpapers, though, there was the survivor's mocking cry: "Ho Hah!" boldly scrawled across the pages.

That "Ho Hah!" echoes through every act of creative childlike anarchy, from the Three Stooges' *nyuck nyuck nyuck* to Joey Ramones' ecstatic "Hey Ho Let's Go!" to the eerie, "wild red-haired youth" in Hope Mirrlees's sublime *Lud-in-the-Mist*, who

would arrive uninvited, and having turned everything topsy-turvy with his pranks, would rush from the house, shouting "Ho! Ho! Hoh!"

Compared to Shockheaded Peter, Harry Potter has the vitality of a squashed Cheerio. "The Phenomenon of Harry Potter" should (but won't) be the last word on the sub-

ject. In it, Zipes points out the sexist, formulaic pieties of J. K. Rowling's books and presents pretty damning evidence that, in the guise of "classic fantasy," the Harry Potter books are in fact that most loathsome of all Christmas gifts, the "good" (meaning "safe") books that threaten or challenge no one, the very *eidos* of the volume of which it is said, "Well, at least s/he's reading something." [I should say here that I am a parent as well, with two children, and I have read every one of the Harry Potter books aloud. Harry and his chums have always seemed about as remarkable to me as the Hardy Boys, though sporadically funnier.]

Zipes is adamant and unapologetic in his final summing up, that "the Harry Potter books...will certainly help children become functionally literate" and little else. I share his disgust and chagrin, though I may hold out more hope than he does when he states that

children from two to sixteen tend to be indiscriminate readers. This is not to slight their intelligence or taste, but they rarely voice complaints. They read and view what they like.... They will read and look at anything placed in front of them....

I won't argue with that, having spent thousands of childhood's mornings at the dining table, watching my brothers absorbed in the backs of cereal boxes. But I think that Zipes does not give enough credit here to the enduring omnivorous anarchy of children, even in such culturally endangered pastimes as reading. My nine-year-old has read Harry Potter and every junky Star Wars book he can find, but the book he *loves*, and *rereads*, is Daniel Pinkwater's *Borgel*, a science fiction novel that might have been written by Mel Brooks (another anarchist enjoying a rapturous cultural renaissance). (Note to Prof. Zipes: My son also loved William Mayne's Hob stories.) My daughter really does read everything; Harry Potter vaguely amused and ultimately bored her, as Nancy Drew did, but she adores Diana Wynne Jones.

This is admittedly a very small and unrepresentative cultural sampling, and from one day to the next I have no idea if either of these children will ever read another book. Still, they have access to reading material of every kind; Zipes's litany of "Books, comics, fashion and sports magazines, newspapers, advertisements, dictionaries, textbooks, address books, mail, poster,

and signs." Zipes fears that books are too expensive for any but middle-class families; most writers I know are barely *working* class, yet we manage to scrounge books from tag sales, library sales, the dump (and sometimes even publishers) — it can be done. What is unconscionable, as Zipes points out, is the collusion between schools and corporations in "sponsoring" efforts such as the Scholastic "Book" Club, where much of what is offered to children — Goosebumps books, Harry Potter diaries, those interminable girl's series books — is no better than a literary Happy Meal.

Still, children survive. Most parents have seen how a toddler can graze, seemingly indiscriminately, on food, yet against all odds manage to eat a balanced diet; older kids can, I think, do much the same with books — but the table (or library) has to hold more than junk food. Here is where librarians and teachers are supposed to come in, of course: but ultimately librarians and teachers are — well, not useless, but auxiliary. What we need is for PARENTS TO READ, AND NOT JUST STEPHEN KING AND OPRAH'S CLUB SELECTIONS. And I *know for a fact* that most of you (well, maybe not *you* reading

this now, but everyone else) DON'T read. I know it because I see you at school, I walk with you, I'm related to you — and you don't read at all.

You ought to be ashamed.

So I have a modest proposal for every parent out there. Go out and buy, not *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, but *Slovenly Peter* (or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, or *The Chocolate War*, or *Borgel*, or *Ella Enchanted*, or *The Giver*, or ...) and — *read it yourself*.

If it offends you or disturbs you, good; if it makes you laugh, even better. Then, when you're finished, give it to your kids (the younger the better) and see what happens.

Because if you don't, that terrible long-legged tailor will come for them — only this time it's not their thumbs he's after. It's their minds.

Ho Hah!

GEEK LOVE

Poor Hans Christian Andersen! From portraits and period accounts related in Jackie Wulfschlager's excellent new biography, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller*, Andersen looked like Shockheaded Peter, or maybe Dickens's Uriah Heep — tall, ungainly, storklike, with a demeanor

that veered uncomfortably between childlike arrogance and bourgeois obsequiousness. The son of a shoe-maker father and an illiterate mother, Andersen may not ever have achieved the physical beauty of his most famous creation, The Ugly Duckling, but he did manage by the end of his life (he died in 1875, at the age of seventy) to win the friendship and approbation of princes, queens, duchesses, artists, writers, composers, and — needless to say — children everywhere. Wulfschlager gives a complete and immensely readable accounting of Andersen's life, from his impoverished childhood to his success as Europe's first and foremost creator of original fairy tales. Along the way she provides cogent commentary on the relationship between Andersen's early years, in the rural Danish village of Odense, mostly unchanged since medieval times, and his often unhappy residence in the unrelentlessly bourgeois, modern city Copenhagen, where Andersen — like his Little Mermaid — was never quite accepted or recognized as he longed to be. Like much of his work, Andersen's life was intensely melancholy and informed by a profound sense of aloneness: he was a bisexual who lacked the courage, or emotional

language, to act upon his desires; famous himself, he was famously in love with the singer Jenny Lind, perhaps the first modern celebrity; he tormented himself for decades over the refusal of a staunchly heterosexual and supremely tactless male friend to permit Andersen to address him by the familiar "Du" rather than the formal "De."

Yet he was also well-traveled, urbane, in demand with royalty and seemingly every major cultural figure of his day. Wulfschlager draws on Andersen's journals, letters, and contemporary accounts, as well as the formidable body of work Andersen produced, not just the fairy tales but novels, poems, travelogues — a prodigious amount of material. Throughout, Andersen's work appears to have sprung directly from his life, lively and green, as though conjured from dry grass. One is left at the end with a vivid portrait of a difficult, sad man, surrounded but not overwhelmed by the vast, many-colored army of his creations.

BOX OF DELIGHTS

Finally, we have the substantial *Treasury of the Fantastic: Romanticism to Early Twentieth Century Literature*. In fact the Treasury is a

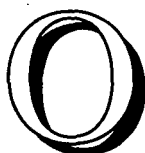
hefty compilation of forty-odd fantastic stories and poems, all in the public domain. Some of the works are fantasy — "The Golden Key," "The Griffin and the Minor Canon," some supernatural — "Carmilla," "Casting the Runes," "The Ghost Ship," some Haute Literature — Edith Wharton's "The Eyes," Virginia Woolf's "A Haunted House." As a collection it's pretty great — who's going to argue with Dunsany's "The Sword of Welleran," E. Nesbit's delightful "The Book of Beasts," "The Bottle Imp" or "The Yellow Wallpaper"? I do however wonder if we need even one more collection that includes "The Monkey's Paw" and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," but then I'm old-fashioned.

The editors, David Sandner and Jacob Weisman, have done a fine job and a service to humanity in bringing these all together, relatively inexpensively and handsomely produced in one volume. Should there be a second edition, however (and I hope there will be), they would make a more unassailable bid for posterity by including even the most rudimentary bibliographical information pertaining to these treasured texts; the lack of same is, I must say, regrettable to the extreme. ¶

In the past two years, Alex Irvine has regaled us with a science-fictional vision of ancient Egypt, a glimpse of immortality in the near future, and a contemporary ghost story. Now he takes us into the future for an interesting look at the old man-vs.-nature conflict.

Elegy for a Greenwiper

By Alex Irvine



ORBITAL SENSORS DETECTED the nanobloom just after sunrise. Within seconds, automated plasma burns had cauterized the site, less than one hundred kilometers from Hancock Dome. Overflying puffballs poured forth a stream of scrubbers designed to lock in on hydrocarbons and free oxygen. Maps of Kindred IV were redrawn to include the bloom as a warning to prospectors and surveyors.

Ten seconds later, greenwipers were called in.

The suborbital burn squeezed a headache from Krzysztof Nowak's sinuses. He closed his eyes, let his suit's autodoc equalize pressure and goose the humidity up a few percent. By the time the transport had crested its parabolic course and begun its accelerated fall back to the rocks of Kindred IV, the rebellion in his sinuses had been successfully quelled.

A smooth pattern of retros guided the transport in a sharp curve through a sandstorm. Clear of the storm, the pilot set out the circular quarantine course. Krz checked his filaments: clear to the left, clear to the

right, clear to the apex that would drop from the transport's belly once all of the greenwipers had made their jumps.

His suit's subliminals, keyed to reinforce and focus, purred in his ear: *Humanity has proved that it cannot live in the green. Domes save both us and what we would destroy. A taste of green is the first taste of mortality.*

GO, flashed the light above his bay, and Krzysztof jumped.

Thirty seconds to ground. Krzysztof's heads-up displayed the unfolding filaments of the containment hemi, anchored every hundred meters by a greenwiper in full dress. Bezel to his left, Morgan to his right, and in front and below the seared rock and sand that marked the area of the bloom.

Nobody had told Krzysztof what to expect. Any one of a dozen organized groups could pull off a terraforming bloom; the suit's processors had categorized more than a million separate nanos and attributed them to different cells. He had time to wonder which signature would light up in the heads-up retinal display, time to wonder why the greenies kept trying, time to think about the end of his shift, time to savor the whiskey he would drink and visualize the face of the woman who would keep him company that night.

His boots punched through Kindred's crust of frozen sand, settling shin-deep in the ashy lithosphere. The filaments began to grow, thickening and twining into an invisible spiderweb designed to catch molecular flies. Krzysztof released the flight locks and engaged his suit's joint servos. He deployed his plasma nozzle. Samplers darted into the thin carbon-dioxide atmosphere and returned with captured nanos, invisible enemy soldiers that under scanning would yield their secrets. Processors profiled the interlopers, came back with the verdict:

Viriditas.

"Big leagues," Krzysztof breathed. Confirmation came from Bezel and Morgan even as puffballs settled into the gaps between filaments, clouding the atmosphere with scrubbers known to be effective against Viriditas nanos.

Forty seconds after touchdown, the containment hemi was complete. Krzysztof stepped back from the gleaming surface. The storm cell loomed

to the north, rolling down on them from the Kellerman Massif. Krzysztof blew his distributed network, surrounding himself with a ten-thousand-cubic-meter fog of sensors. A few stray Viriditas nanos showed up on the screens and were quickly annihilated by scrubbers.

All according to plan, Krzysztof thought. He tongued his mike. "Hemi complete. Fog deployed. Nowak on station. Report counter-clock."

The litany of names settled his nerves: Morgan, Greenwell, Bemelman, Okafor, on around the circle until Zeke Bezel completed the two-kilometer perimeter of greenwipers. All fogged, all on station. Command back in the Dome would have a hard time finding something to bitch about.

Off to Krz's right, plasma flared. "Who?" he barked.

His heads-up turned orange. Lemelin's position flared green, and at the same time Tig Okafor's voice burst across the link.

"Green outside the hemi!"

A dozen voices at once: "Burn!"

"Can't!" Tig's voice too high, wavering. "It's inside Reggie's suit!"

Krz slaved Tig's camera. He could not credit what he saw.

Leaves were curling from the faceplate of Rejean Lemelin's suit.

"Burn, Tig," he said steadily. "Burn now."

Plasma flared, and the sandstorm was on them.

THIRTY-SIX HOURS later, Krzysztof read the reports from his pallet in the Dome hospital. The foam treatments were doing wonders for his lungs; in another week he'd be able to resume his duties. Lemelin, Okafor, Bemelman, and Ross wouldn't be so lucky.

Four lost, Krz thought. Bloomed.

This was a new tactic for Viriditas. They had never before attacked greenwipers, never encoded anything that would be a threat to human life of any political persuasion. Had it been a mistake? Had one of their nanos errored, locked on the wrong target? There were other groups of greenies that wouldn't shed any tears over four greenwipers, but Viriditas professed a love of all life and demanded that life be given a chance to flourish wherever ingenuity or technology could give it root. If they had undertaken an attack like this, they weren't Viriditas any more.

He tapped the terminal, flitting past a relief map of Kindred IV, pocked with containment hemis that varied in size from a hundred meters to nearly seven kilometers. Thirty-seven times Krzysztof Nowak had been part of the team that stabilized those hemis, which would hold their seal for ten years in good weather. By that time, isolation from light and heat would have killed off the greenie nanos inside, and mopup teams could go through with plasmas again to make sure.

Thirty-seven times. He'd seen tiny plants blooming in hundred-degree-below-zero temperatures; huge flowers vainly turning toward the dim disk of Kindred, four hundred million kilometers away, before flaring into ash in the glare of plasma discharge; a dozen varieties of lichen and algae creeping their inevitable ways over gray rocks that had never known the touch of life. Every time Krzysztof had stood firm, had burned and fogged and sealed, had made sure that the only green on Kindred IV grew in hydroponic vats and artistic mantelpiece vases.

He believed in the Paradox: Green gave life, but the first taste of green was the first taste of mortality. Man had been cast out of the Garden, and to build another Garden was to foreordain another Fall.

Doctor Grello entered Krzysztof's room. "Officer Nowak," he said. "Breathing the local gases again, I see."

"Well enough," Krz said. "I can get out of here."

Grello perused the display connected to Krz's monitors. "So it seems," he said eventually. "We'll keep a colony working in your lungs, cleaning scar tissue out of your alveoli, and before you leave the hospital you'll need to be green-screened."

"How's the rest of the detail?" Krz asked. When Grello hesitated, he added, "I already know four of my people were bloomed. Give me some good news about the ones who survived."

"I wish I had good news." Grello made a notation on Krz's monitor. "The truth is, you're the only one who has survived this long."

Nineteen? Nineteen greenwipers, bloomed by Viriditas nanos?

Why wasn't this on the nets?

"Every other member of your detail suffered fatal blooms within twenty-four hours of your deployment. Apparently this new nano can break the sampler containment. Either it attacks the sampler's wiring or," the doctor cleared his throat, "or it propagates itself as information along

a suit's processor circuits and, er, reinstantiates in the human epidermis."

Krz couldn't speak. A nano that could write itself into information and transform back into matter?

"That last bit is speculation," Grello said, as if saying that would make Krz forget he'd said it.

"Was it Viriditas? This new bug?"

"All of the signatures recovered were of Viriditas bugs," Grello said. "To this point, however, we haven't been able to type the fatal. It rewrites itself faster than our processors can track, and we can't crack its propagation algorithm."

Krz took a few moments to absorb all this. He sat up, looked at himself. Wondered when he would see the first patches of green on his skin.

"How long do I have?" he asked Grello.

Grello could only shrug. "I don't even know how long I have," he said evenly. "We can't tell if the nano is propagating in the hospital, or in any of the staff who treated members of your detail. It appears to be completely gone, but normal quarantine procedures clearly wouldn't work with a bug that can propagate as pure information. For this reason, the loss of your detail and news of this new nano have been withheld."

"Nobody knows?"

"Nobody who isn't a greenwiper or military authority, except for a very few people in this hospital." Grello poked at Krz's monitor again, then turned it off. "You can go. Like I said, there's no point in quarantining you if this nano propagates the way we think it does. You've been placed on paid leave until this is resolved. Be informed that your discretion is of paramount importance in maintaining order in Hancock Dome. You will be physically restrained if you speak of this to anyone."

It was an open secret in Hancock Dome that a small percentage of its population held heretical views. In an ostentatious display of respect for individual rights, this group's greenie sympathies were tolerated as long as they remained purely sentiment. To ensure that belief could not translate into action, suspected greenies were prevented from any occupations that brought them into controlling contact with nanotech. Periodically, too, their homes were searched and all technical gear more

sophisticated than the average twentieth-century microchip confiscated. No great outrage accompanied this abrogation of civil liberties: greenie sympathies, the popular thinking went, had as a natural consequence technological deprivation. Possession of unlicensed nanoengineering equipment was grounds for transportation to Kindred VI-17, a tiny asteroid nearly two billion kilometers from its star.

In this way, the Hermetic divines who governed Hancock Dome provided an outlet for the inevitable greenie yearnings that arose in a domed population. Human beings' sinful urges, they reasoned, were not limited to sexual license and blasphemy, and just as a certain number of venereal and verbal transgressions had to be tolerated in the name of civil order, a degree of understanding was called for when considering greenies. Scarcely three generations removed from the colonizing voyage, Hancock's nineteen thousand citizens were prone to fits of nostalgia for such features of Earth as sky, ocean, and prairie. To unsympathetically crush such impulses would display a certain lack of mercy, especially since Earth itself was no longer fit for anything but domed habitation. The greenies' dreams were doomed to be just that.

Thus it was that Krzysztof Nowak, veteran greenwiper and citizen of Hermetic Society-founded Hancock Dome, could find himself in a tavern whose walls were adorned with sky- and seascapes, with animated frescoes of animal herds and mountain climbers, with detailed portraits of wildflowers and flying birds. *What am I doing here?* He had to close his eyes and weather a wave of doorframe-clutching agoraphobia before he could find a seat at the bar and order whiskey and beer.

The whiskey hit him like a slow-motion orgasm, the beer like the chill of sweat evaporating from his skin. He'd had nothing to drink in nearly three days. The bartender set him up again, and Krz took a discreet look around, avoiding the nauseating pictures and settling briefly on each of the tavern's other patrons. The left corner of his mouth curled into a wry half-grin: none of the greenie women were likely to give him the hero treatment every greenwiper became accustomed to from the female population at large. But he wasn't here to be treated like a hero. He was here because someone here had answers to questions he couldn't ask anywhere else. Krz downed the second whiskey and waited.

It took longer than he'd expected, but after twenty minutes or so a

long-jawed woman with bruise-colored eyes and a vidstar cascade of curly hair sat down at his left. "Hey, greenwiper," she said.

Krz nodded. He lifted a hand and the bartender refilled his glass. "Whatever she wants too," Krz said, inclining his head toward his new companion.

"Funny thing," the woman said.

Krz looked at her, drank beer. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Alice. You're Krzysztof."

"The joy of reputation," Krz said.

Alice smiled slightly. "Funny thing," she said again.

Krz raised an eyebrow.

"Well, six blooms in the past twenty-four hours. That's a lot, isn't it?"

Krz's eyebrow stayed raised. Six was a lot, if it was true.

"And one of Hancock's finest greenwipers drinking in a greenie bar while blooms mar the surface of our dear dead Kindred IV. That seems odd," Alice mused.

You don't know the half of it, Krz wanted to say. You could be a bloom waiting to happen, and the nanos that would do it might be just electrical impulses in your brain. I suppose that is odd.

He killed the third whiskey, chased it with what was left of the second beer. The bartender appeared again, and as Krz sipped at the fresh beer he had a sudden urge to go to church. I shouldn't be here with greenies, he thought. I got the answer I was looking for.

"I have to go," he said.

He thought she'd protest, but she stood. "Thanks for the beer," she said. "I'll be around when you come back."

He needed a dose of reassurance, a dose of uncomplicated belief. There was a church offering hourly teaching near the puffball staging hangars. Krz arrived just as a gowned Hermetic divine was beginning her homily.

"Humankind," she began, her freckled face young and earnest, "was given dominion over the Earth. No; we were commanded to dominion. And on Earth we tried to assume it. What happened? We equated knowledge with dominion, and because of knowledge we fell.

"Now, you can believe that literally happened, or you can believe that

it's a parable. Either way, we realize that at some point in human history we left off ensuring our own survival and set about endangering the survival of every other living thing. And what did we discover? Only that we depended on those things for our own survival, and that when we began bringing Earth's ecosystem down around our ambitious ears we began the process of our own destruction as well.

"But we were commanded to dominion! Whether the command was divine or just our genome finding its voice, we responded. We strove to dominate until we destroyed everything that was intended as our dominion. So what is the lesson? What are we to understand from the collapse of the Earth that gave us life? The lesson is that life will not be dominated. Life demands slippage, variation, rebellion, and if we examine ourselves we will understand that the urge to dominion is as much a part of us as the urge to feed and the urge to procreate. From this comes the Paradox: green gave us life, but it also commanded our deaths because our urge to dominion inevitably entailed our own destruction. Man has been cast out of the Garden, and to build another Garden is to foreordain another Fall. The first taste of green is the first taste of mortality.

"And so we came here. Kindred IV had never known life when we arrived, and outside the Dome it still does not. Here we can live as humans were meant to live; here we can spread and command our environment; here we can fill a vacuum, not destabilize a system that requires our absence for its survival.

"Here we can obey the command we have been given."

The divine stopped, and smiled beatifically. Krzysztof realized he was the sole member of her audience. A moment later he realized she was a holo.

"You look troubled," the holodivine said, her smile fading into an expression of tender concern.

All Krz could do was repeat her words: "Life will not be dominated," he said. "How do we know that we won't wake up one morning and find out that the grapevines in the vats can live outside the dome?"

"There's no atmosphere on Kindred IV," the divine said comfortingly. "No soil, no water. Nothing can survive here without us. This is dominion. Here we can achieve dominion without extinction."

Life will not be dominated, Krz thought. The Viriditas nanos that he

was sure he carried, were they alive? "This is my problem," he said. "If the greenies can create life on this planet, isn't that the purest form of dominion? To create life where there was none? To demand life in a lifeless world?"

"But this is to demand self-destruction," she countered. "What if the greenies were to terraform Kindred IV? Wouldn't we then set about destroying it just as we did Earth? Have we changed so much from our great-great-great-great-grandparents? Are we not human, and does not to be human mean to seek dominion?"

Thirty-seven times I have sought dominion over greenie nanos, Krz thought. Thirty-seven times I eradicated them. Creation and destruction: this is dominion.

And if all creation is self-destruction, then all we can do is destroy.

KRZYSZTOF NOWAK walked with ferrocrete under the soles of his boots, artificial light in his eyes, steel and glass walling him off from vacuum. Hancock Dome was nine kilometers across and two hundred meters high at its apex. Half a dozen smaller hemispheres surrounded it, nearly as high but much smaller in diameter. He walked past the subterranean passages that led to these outer domes, with their manufacturing, energy, and maintenance facilities; he walked past the long blocks of greenhouses and hydroponic farms; he walked past chapels and offices and apartment blocks and training facilities and when Kindred's pallid disk was just breaking the horizon he walked through the door of the greenie bar he'd left the night before.

"Explain something to me," he said to Alice, who was still sitting at the bar. She was alone except for the bartender, who had a shot and a beer waiting when Krz sat down.

Alice shifted on her stool, facing him. "I'll explain what I can."

"Was it part of the plan to have me wander in here?"

"Well, there aren't that many places you could have gone," she said.

"Did you know I would go to chapel?"

The whiskey made Krz's eyes water. Alice reached out, touched him on the shoulder.

"We know nothing," she said. "But we are guessing right more and more often."

Krz worked on his beer for a minute or so.

"When will I bloom?" he asked her. Like Doctor Grello, all she could do was shrug.

Greenwipers enjoyed the same forbearance that characterized the old Vatican's attitude toward Crusaders. They defended civilization, and their excesses were glossed over. So when Dome authorities discovered Krzysztof Nowak stupidly drunk near a puffball hangar, they put him in an autotaxi home rather than charging him with conduct unbecoming or disorderly. His supervisors, although surprised that he'd been drinking in a greenie bar, wrote it off after the bartender reported that he hadn't said anything to anybody he shouldn't have. Alice they already knew about, and were waiting for her to disclose connections, allegiances, covert machinations.

The greenwiper authorities did not know how far the nanos circulating in Krz's system had propagated. They had debated eliminating him and the entire hospital staff, but had come to the conclusion that such action would likely endanger Hancock Dome's ability to sustain itself. Then they had debated eliminating only Krzysztof, but decided against partial quarantine measures since the more radical course of action was so uncertain. If Officer Nowak was alive, he might teach them something. Dead, he was only muck for the hydroponic vats.

What Doctor Grello had speculated, his superiors knew without having to learn it from Krzysztof. The Viriditas nanos were unlike any they had seen before. They could write themselves into pure information, employing neurons and inorganic circuitry with equal facility, and reconstitute on command.

They were organic.

And they would bloom.

"After what you told me last night," Krz said to Alice, "I tried to steal a puffball."

"You shouldn't drink so much," she said.

He looked up through the dome at the stars. Where was Earth? I need

a sense of origins, Krz thought. "They probably know I'm talking to you," he said.

She nodded. "But they don't know what the nanos will do. They're expecting me to give away something, but I don't know either, so they're waiting for me to find out something I shouldn't."

"I haven't really changed my mind, you know," he said. "I still believe in the Paradox."

"You can believe what you want. That won't change what's true."

"What is true?"

"We can't close ourselves off. We're strangling in here, Krz. Humans need to be out in air and light and heat and moisture. We need green things that don't do what we tell them. You know what happens in a closed system, and it doesn't get any more closed than Hancock Dome."

Entropy, Krz thought. And these nanos, pure information, are at war with it. So easy to believe. I carry information. Information will kill me. Entropy will kill me. To build another Garden is to preordain another Fall. All creation is destruction.

That night he did not drink.

When Krzysztof Nowak succeeded in stealing a puffball, he streaked along Kindred IV's equator. The Viriditas nanos leaped from his brain to the puffball's processors, instructing them to manufacture and deploy a fogged array. Some of these immediately began breaking down the puffball's exhaust, freeing oxygen and bonding the complex molecules into heavy groups that fell to Kindred's surface. There other nanos were at work: freeing still more oxygen and nitrogen, creating hydrocarbon chains from minerals in Kindred's rocky crust, constructing anaerobic bacteria that would begin grinding rocks into soil. Crystals began to form on the surface, glittering weakly in Kindred's distant glow.

Krzysztof's theft had been anticipated. The Hermetic authorities in Hancock Dome, knowing the battle lost, waited sixty seconds in the hope that Krzysztof would contact the greenie traitor who had doomed the Hermetic community on Kindred IV. If that traitor could be rooted out, the discovery would be worth the sacrifice of Hancock, indeed of Kindred IV itself. During that sixty seconds, Krzysztof traveled thirty-three kilometers, trailing nanos in a widening plume across Kindred IV's

lithosphere. When that time had elapsed with no signal being sent, plasma strikes vaporized the stolen puffball and sterilized the surface half a kilometer on either side of the puffball's flight path. Every greenwiper in Hancock Dome was deployed without being told what they were up against, and every one of them bloomed within ninety seconds of sampling the distributed nanos. The puffballs accompanying them began distributing Viriditas nanos rather than scrubbers; another forty-seven square kilometers was contaminated before plasma strikes destroyed the nanojacked puffballs and dying greenwipers.

While authorities in Hancock Dome debated courses of action, nanos quietly attacked Krz's ashes, breaking the oxygen free and rearranging the carbon and hydrogen left behind.

Alice grieved. For Krzysztof, certainly, but more for an ideal. No, ideals: hers and those of the Hermetics who had founded Hancock Dome. Four hundred and twenty greenwipers dead. They bloomed with new life, but.

Viriditas had sworn itself to life. Alice had known about these new nanos, about the breakthrough that allowed the nano to remember its identity as it transcribed itself into information. She had agreed that such a development was the logical manifestation of the dual principle that information was fundamental to the universe, and that the ultimate goal of the universe was life. She had agreed that the deployment of the new nanos was necessary to counter the living death of Hermeticism.

But she had never agreed that the projected loss of life was justified. How could she, when Viriditas had been founded on the principle that life must be propagated, that life was the single invaluable thing in the universe and that it must never be sacrificed?

She had once received a message that offered a rationale for this action. It referred to an old Christian story, the parable of the sower. Some seeds fall on rocky ground, some among weeds, some where it is too hot. These were the nineteen greenwipers in Krz's detail. Each bloomed too early. But Krzysztof Nowak was fertile, and grew, and was fruitful and multiplied.

On the scale of history, what did it matter that one colony failed? What would it matter if a terraformed Kindred IV failed as well? What

mattered was that someday it would succeed. Someday humankind would find a way to taste the green, and that taste would not curdle with mortality on the tongue.

But four hundred and twenty greenwipers dead today, she thought. History does not matter today. What matters today is that the Hermets were right. Viriditas tasted green and sowed death.

She was thinking this when the Hermetic authorities arrested her.

"Life will not be dominated," she told her accusers. "You're right about that."

Was this nano designed on Kindred IV? they asked her.

She did not know.

Was Viriditas behind the nano, or had someone else used their known signatures as a screen?

The question gave her pause. Having never actually met or spoken with the designers, she did not know.

If we survive the bloom, they told her, you will be transported.

She understood. "I have a statement," she said.

They indicated that she was to proceed.

"The greenwipers, dedicated to the eradication of life, have themselves been eradicated," she began, the words already feeling dead on her tongue. "This is a great tragedy because human lives were lost, but in this loss a balance has begun to be restored. I do not know who created this nano, and I do not know what their ultimate goals are, but I believe that this nano embodies the pure principle of life. Life respects no boundaries. It travels across oceans and across space; why should it not traverse the boundary between matter and energy? Why should life not be information instead of only transmit it?

"Life respects no ideals. Viriditas's ideals lie in the ashes of dead greenwipers, and Hermetic ideals failed when life escaped their containment domes."

Enough, they said.

Outside Hancock Dome, nanos worked their way into Kindred IV's crust. They extracted and isolated, purified and combined. They propagated, and Kindred IV came to life. ♪

Summertime being vacation time, we thought, we'd give you a getaway suggestion—admittedly, one that's perverse and rather macabre—compliments of Michael Kandel. Mr. Kandel is a renowned editor, writer, and translator whose last appearance in our pages was "Hooking Up" in our August 1999 issue. He says that after a long "vacation" of his own—otherwise known as jury duty for a murder trial—he looks forward eagerly to returning to work and life as usual.

Mayhem Tours

By Michael Kandel

THE CUSTOMS INSPECTOR'S eyes narrowed when Jonathan got on the line with his two suitcases. He pointed. Jonathan groaned silently.

"Me?" he asked.

The official's finger didn't waver.

Jonathan sighed. He went and put his suitcases on the long table and opened them. There was of course no way to hide the assault rifle, the ammo, the bayonet.

The customs inspector, seeing them, nodded: As he had thought. His hand went out, palm up, which meant, in every country, Your passport.

Jonathan produced his passport.

The inspector flipped through it, compared the photograph in it with Jonathan, looking at first one, then the other, back and forth.

They made it hard for you. Oh, they were quick enough to take your money and promise you thrills, but in their hearts they despised you. When they should have been despising themselves. Wasn't this whole thing their idea to begin with?

Jonathan wasn't doing anything wrong. He had paid: six months' salary up front, and another six in installments, at twelve percent. It was practically like taking out a mortgage.

The customs inspector returned the passport and gestured to a booth at the far end of the long table. Won't even talk to me, Jonathan thought. He took his suitcases and proceeded to the booth.

The official in the booth examined his passport, did the same careful back-and-forth between face and photograph, and asked: "Mayhem Tours?"

Jonathan rolled his eyes. Of course it was Mayhem Tours. Did they take him for a terrorist?

"Yes," he said, "I'm with Mayhem."

"Tour receipt and authorization, please."

Jonathan gave the official his receipt and authorization, thinking, This is harassment. Thinking also, goddamn Frenchies.

They weren't French, although they talked through their noses in this postage-stamp country. They also wore berets. But the signs in the airport weren't in French; they were an impossible mix of letters, a lot of j's and i's so close together, they blurred: you couldn't be sure where the dots went. The guidebooks all advised, Use English.

"Thank you, Mr. Cobb." The official in the booth returned the papers, handed Jonathan a couple of brochures, and waved him on.

Jonathan glanced at the brochures. One was museums and galleries; the other, what the traveler should know about sexually transmitted diseases. At least that wasn't going to be a problem: he wasn't planning on raping. Women made him uneasy.

No, he was here to take a human life. He had read a couple of books on the subject. The tremendous rush you got. Nothing like it for sweeping away the dust and cobwebs. He had been sitting at a desk for more than ten years now, going over other people's numbers, correcting mistakes, breathing office air: he needed sweeping.

For a weekday, there was very little traffic going into the city. Had their population been affected already, or were the citizens just keeping a low profile? The cabby didn't seem nervous, didn't look over his shoulder once, though Jonathan could have blown his brains out at any time, or opened his throat with the bayonet.

The bayonet was razor-sharp. You could slice paper with it while the

paper was falling free. Jonathan hadn't actually done that himself but saw a demonstration once.

He looked up at the clouds. The city was like a park, it was so quiet. He opened his window, listened for the sound of shooting. Didn't hear it.

At the hotel, the man at the desk, plump and sporting a little pointy Frenchie mustache, asked if Jonathan was with Mayhem Tours.

Is it written on my face? Jonathan thought. Well, but probably no one came here anymore, except tourists like him, after the new laws.

He realized he had butterflies in his stomach. The books all said you got over that after the first kill. He hoped so.

In his room, he unpacked and went through the rifle manual again. He assembled his weapon quickly, held it, sighted down it, rested his trigger finger gently on the trigger. Remembering the rules from his lessons, like, Don't flinch, lean into it. The rifle was an R720 Eckheim, recoilless, top of the line, warm in his hands, smelling of gun oil.

"Pow," he whispered, the stock to his cheek, picturing a fat man in a bowler throwing up his arms and falling in a slow cinematic spray of red.

But first he should get something to eat, have a cup of coffee. The caffeine would steady him. His stomach was upset. Air travel did that: the change in air pressure, the bumps and dips when the plane descended.

He went looking for a sandwich place, found one around the corner. It was open but empty. The aproned sandwich maker and the capped waitress watched Jonathan while he sat and read the English half of the menu. There was some crusted food on the menu, and on the table a dead fly, feet up.

"I'll have a prune Danish and a coffee," Jonathan finally said. "Milk, please, not cream."

The waitress didn't move.

From the other side of the counter, the sandwich man asked, in a guttural accent, "Where is your gun?" The question echoed in the shop.

Jonathan didn't have a snappy answer. He said, "I haven't started yet. I just got off the plane."

Maybe he should start with the goddamn sandwich man. Pow, and down goes the guy in his apron, flailing like a windmill amid clattering crockery.

They stared at him as the wall clock ticked. He got up at last and left,

beating a retreat, blushing. He was very hungry, getting one of those hunger headaches.

The people here were biting the hand that fed them. Or nipping it. Millions of dollars must be coming in from tourism now. Pouring into their treasury. Jonathan didn't even want to think what he had paid for his five days. It wasn't to look at a lot of stupid Frenchie museums and galleries.

He walked several blocks, passed a department store window filled with mannequins. One was a button-eyed male in a tweed hunting jacket and hunter's hat holding a shotgun stylishly in the crook of his arm.

There seemed to be no restaurants or coffee shops in this direction. It was mostly office buildings. Jonathan turned back, his stomach rumbling.

The restaurant lounge at the hotel was ridiculously expensive and smelled of furniture polish. A lot of dark oak, fake, and a fake hearth. You knew the food would be a disaster. He went in anyway, and it was, the steak tasteless and full of gristle.

Disgusted, he went to his room and lay down for a while. Then he got up and armed himself, read through the rifle manual one more time, took a deep breath, and called a cab.

He decided to try one of the nightspots recommended in the guidebook. It turned out to be around the corner. The cabby overcharged, but Jonathan couldn't prove it, still unfamiliar with the exchange rate.

At the nightspot, his heart pounded so much that he missed when he shot at a lady on the stairs. She wore a spotted fur stole and was chic. The report made the people start, and a few folks even hit the deck — but a second later everyone was back in position and acting nonchalant. No one looked at Jonathan.

Jonathan guessed that if this establishment was in the guidebook and on the recommended list, then they must be on sitting-duck duty here. Probably they all had maximum insurance policies, the beneficiary parts filled out carefully.

They're laughing at me, Jonathan thought. He ordered a drink, a double scotch. Tried to sip it, but drank it down, too nervous to sip.

"Another?" asked the bartender. His accent was oily.

Jonathan shook his head no. With any more alcohol in his system, he wouldn't be able to hit a thing.

He took out his billfold, paid, overtipped — too many bills came out of the wallet, but he couldn't take them back, with the bartender looking on. Jonathan left in such a hurry that he forgot his rifle and had to return for it. Thank God no one said, "You forgot your rifle."

In the street he saw the chic lady leaving the nightspot with her escort. He followed, hurried after them, saw them turn a corner into an alley. When they stopped midway down it, seeing him, he took aim. The man backed up against a brick wall and spread his arms, as victims do in the movies. Jonathan, so he wouldn't miss this time, didn't blink, squeezed the trigger easy, with a slow exhale, like taking an important picture for an album.

"Wait. Don't," blurted the woman. "He has an old mother."

"So do I," said Jonathan. His mother was recently widowed, in a new retirement village now in South Carolina, along with a lot of toothless codgers. He fired once, twice. The bangs shattered the air, as in a genuine shootout. The man buckled but didn't drop. Stood again.

Jesus Christ, wasn't hit.

Ears humming, Jonathan could hardly believe it. Had someone put blanks in his gun?

No, the man was hit in the hand. Biting his lower lip, he pulled out a handkerchief. Then the woman was binding the man's hand with the handkerchief. The handkerchief turned dark. Had to be blood, though you couldn't see the color in the alley.

"Are you okay?" asked Jonathan.

The man nodded. He was shaking.

Jonathan wondered how he could have missed at such close range. Must be jet lag. He should have waited a full day before starting. Some people advised that, but each day was so expensive. You wanted to make every minute count.

He could dispatch both the man and the woman with his bayonet. Two or three hard thrusts apiece ought to do it. You had to put your shoulder into the thrust and follow through. Jonathan remembered his bayonet instructor's saying that over and over. It's like the swing in golf. But the two stood side by side at the wall, pathetically cringing together in the middle of the night. Maybe they were brother and sister.

Jonathan walked away, not caring what they thought. The scotch and

the excitement of almost taking a life made him feel better. Almost human.

Back in his room, he realized he was exhausted, so he turned in. He slept like a log.

In the morning, he went down and was told that the hotel didn't serve breakfast.

"Where can I get breakfast?" he asked.

The man at the desk shrugged a Frenchie shrug and made a moue, his pointed mustache turned up at the ends.

Jonathan raised his gun to blow away the twit. There was nothing in the rules that protected hotel employees.

The maître d' or manager didn't even blink, though the muzzle of the weapon was inches from his forehead. The man assumed an expression of weary contempt.

"Killing me, Mr. Cobb," he said in a dental accent, "will only disrupt the service to you during your stay here."

"The service sucks," said Jonathan.

The manager raised one eyebrow. "Surely you cannot mean that, Mr. Cobb. Your room is spotless, your bed has the finest linen. We are three stars."

Jonathan tightened his grip on the rifle, clenched his teeth, and tried to look berserk or on the brink.

The manager countered that with a cold stare. Jonathan realized, sighing, that every day this short Frenchie must stare down dozens of armed and authorized tourists. He gave it up and went out into the overcast morning, thinking of omelets and English muffins.

According to the newspapers, there were more hungry people than ever in Europe today, starving multitudes, because of the crash and depression. Nations had to be creative, or they'd sink with the rest into famine.

Hence, for example, Mayhem Tours.

What do we have to offer, ladies and gentlemen? An experience you cannot get at home, at least not without running the risk of paying for it with many years, possibly life, in prison. On our soil you pay only in dollars, all major credit cards accepted.

Open season on persons of every age, every size, both sexes. The only

exception, and you'll understand this: emergency personnel, such as ambulance drivers and firemen. And, of course, our gendarmes. Who will do everything they can, we promise, to stay out of your way.

Jonathan headed in a direction different from the one yesterday. It was chilly. He should have put on a sweater. There was practically no traffic, and only a few pedestrians. One was a rigid man with a beard, standing at a corner like an advertising dummy.

Jonathan heard the distant crackle of gunfire. On the next block, he shot an old woman across the street. She crumpled but was only playing dead, you could tell from the way she hit the pavement. She was probably chuckling into the gutter.

He fired at a car going past, a red vintage Mazda. A side window on the car shattered. The sound of tinkling glass was satisfying. But the car didn't swerve, the driver kept going, obviously practiced and moving much too fast for Jonathan to shoot out the tires.

He came to a shoe store and went inside, rifle raised. The salesman threw up both hands. Jonathan shot and got the man square in the chest. The man was knocked back against the wall and brought several boxes of shoes down on top of him when he fell. The avalanche of shoe boxes and shoes on the body was a nice touch.

Jonathan blew out air, pictured himself saying to a bunch of silent men in a bar back in St. Louis, "Sure, I've killed a man. Nothing to it."

He was about to leave the store, but something wasn't right. With a foot he moved aside a few of the boxes. No blood anywhere, not a drop.

The man was holding his breath.

"I could have sworn I got you," Jonathan said.

The man sat up. "You did. I'm wearing protection, a vest." He touched his chest, grimaced.

"A vest against bullets that can penetrate armor?"

"It's special mesh, triple-layer, very expensive. Even so," the man said with a lopsided smile, "I'll have one hell of a bruise."

"I would have thought... I don't know, that living here, you'd be resigned. Show a little fatalism. And your family collects on the insurance, don't they?"

The shoe salesman shook his head and got up with a grunt. "The premiums are prohibitive," he said. "As you might expect. You know

insurance companies. Anyway, my wife doesn't need a few hundred thousand, she needs me. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis last month. It started with vision problems, blackouts. She's only twenty-five."

"That's too bad." Jonathan had had a cousin with MS. Jack. Elsie's son.

"They give her a few years," said the man. "We went shopping for a wheelchair a week ago. And she used to ski, was athletic, proud of her body. It's difficult."

Jonathan remembered his cousin at a Christmas party: the slurred speech, the drooping head.

"You wouldn't be interested in a pair of shoes?" asked the shoe man.

"No."

"We have a special sale on Mephistos. Twenty percent off. We have a special arrangement with them."

"Thanks, but I'm traveling light. No room in my suitcases, with the gun and all. I didn't come to shop."

The shoe man nodded.

Jonathan left and continued on. At an intersection he saw another tourist. The man was carrying a really fancy weapon. Was that a Digby 400? Way beyond Jonathan's pocketbook. Jonathan had never even held one of those. The glossy, understated ads in the *New Yorker* didn't reveal the price.

The tourist smiled, waved, came over, hand outstretched. "Hi. Name's Mackenzie. Gordon Mackenzie. My friends call me Gordie."

A strong hand. He was the cheerful, healthy type, probably a CEO enjoying a golden parachute.

Mackenzie pointed, and Jonathan looked. Several hundred feet down the avenue was an overturned school bus.

"Did that myself," Mackenzie said, giving Jonathan a moment or two to take in the exploit. "With this." Patting his Digby 400.

Jonathan gave a polite whistle.

"I took out at least a dozen of them, maybe more," said the tourist. "High-school age, though they don't call it high school here. I forget what they call it."

"Something like gymnasium," said Jonathan, remembering that from a crossword puzzle.

"Caught like rats in a trap," said Mackenzie. "Bam bam." The teeth in his smile were white and even; his eyes twinkled. With a white beard he would have made a perfect Santa Claus. "Not one kid got away."

"Really," said Jonathan.

"I say a dozen, but I wasn't counting," added Mackenzie. "I was too damned excited to count."

"Something to tell at home."

"You bet," said Gordie Mackenzie. "Wish I had taped it. Didn't think of that. Look me up." He gave Jonathan his card. Jonathan gave him his.

They shook hands, wished each other good hunting, and went their separate ways.

Jonathan came to a residential area, a poor neighborhood. In the middle of it was a complex of large gray buildings. The row of emotionless windows said hospital.

He thought, with a flash of inspiration: There are cafeterias in hospitals. He hadn't had breakfast yet.

At the top of the steps was a door that young men and women in labcoats were going in and out of, hands in their pockets, so they had to be interns. He went there, entered, asked a nurse or receptionist how to get to the cafeteria — but a Chinese doctor in the hallway beckoned strenuously.

"Me?" Jonathan asked.

"Yes, hurry," said the doctor.

Jonathan followed him at a trot, to a room where a few people were on the floor, entangled and kicking. It was an emergency, clearly, but what kind?

The man on the bottom had his tongue impossibly far out, and his eyes were two pink marbles. It was a madman. The other three or four men were interns (or orderlies) trying to restrain him. Not doing a very good job.

"You want me to put him out of his misery?" Jonathan asked, thinking of mad dogs. Why would the doctor need him, if not for the rifle and bayonet?

I finally get to kill somebody, he thought.

"No, no," said the doctor, holding up a syringe. "We must give an injection. We are not enough. He is too strong. You must help us."

The madman, like all madmen, had tremendous strength. Already

one of the interns was unconscious. Another stood off to a side, clasp- ing a bitten hand.

Jonathan propped his gun in a corner, got down, and helped keep the madman relatively immobile while the doctor swabbed an arm with an alcohol-soaked cottonball and then put in the long needle.

"Ooo, ooo," said the madman.

"Don't be a baby," Jonathan gritted in his ear as they all struggled. "It's only a needle."

"Excellent," cried the doctor. "You have made him quieter. This is remarkable."

And because Jonathan's presence for some reason had a calming effect, he was asked to stay while the patient underwent the therapy that had been scheduled for him.

They stripped the madman down to his gray underwear and put him in a deep aluminum-and-porcelain tub filled with water. The madman kept trying to stand up, but then finally sat.

Jonathan got his shoes wet from the splashing. His sleeves up to his elbows were soaked.

The tub had pipes coming out of it, and there were big circular meters on the pipes, like plumbing from the nineteenth century. Evidently this country, despite the tourism, was still too poor to afford modern medical equipment.

"Ooo, ooo," the madman said, twitching, only his disheveled head above water now.

The current was going through him.

Jonathan, feeling that he was watching something private and maybe indecent, turned away and started to leave. But the madman reached out unexpectedly, grabbed his hand, and wouldn't let go.

"How touching," observed the Chinese doctor.

Jonathan could feel some of the electricity through the madman, and it wasn't pleasant. He twitched a little himself, as if he had had too much caffeine. It was hard to take a full breath.

Thank God I'm not insane, thought Jonathan. To have to sit for hours in a giant tub with electrodes clipped to your big toes. Or stare at the wall of your cell all day in a haze of drugs and eat mush instead of regular food.

Suddenly the madman choked, writhed, went rigid, and the doctor swore under his breath. Had something gone wrong? Did a fuse blow?

The doctor leaned over the patient, his jet-black hair dipping in the water. "A seizure!" he hissed.

They had to pull the man out and do CPR on the cracked brown linoleum floor — that is, Jonathan had to do it, because the doctor didn't even know CPR, that's how backward they were here. Fortunately he remembered most of it, from the course he had taken twice, evenings, in a public library when he was a graduate student in Passaic.

He took it because his father had died of a heart attack when Jonathan was fifteen, right in the living room, while the whole family watched. A lot of people took CPR because of things like that.

Some memories were etched into your brain forever. The heels digging into the rug. The last convulsion, the long, shuddering sigh as the soul left the body.

After an interminable time Jonathan obtained a pulse in the madman's neck. He raised the madman's feet and counted breaths.

They made a tremendous fuss over this in the hospital. Jonathan wanted to go to the cafeteria, wherever it was, and get some breakfast in him, but people kept shaking his hand and saying in different accents that he was a hero and the mayor would give him a medal.

But he knew they were really laughing at him, because of the irony of it. Almost as if they had planned the whole thing like a practical joke, to make a fool of him, after the money he had shelled out.

And he kept wanting to weep — that was the worst of it — because he had got the heart beating again and the lungs working. Maybe this was how you felt when you brought a baby into the world, if you were a pediatrician or paramedic.

A person couldn't help crying, from the relief of it, after being in such intimate proximity with life and death.

Mainly, though, he wanted to get away from these Frenchie people, so he could go off in a corner somewhere and blow his nose and compose himself. But they wouldn't let him. They made it worse, clapping him on the back and embracing him and kissing him on both cheeks as he wept.

"You saved a life. You saved a life."

Rubbing his nose in it heartlessly. †



FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

ONE FROM COLUMN A

BEFORE *Star Wars* there was *Hidden Fortress*, a film by Akira

Kurosawa that provided the source material for George Lucas's epic fanboy treat. Thus it's only fair that an Asian epic of sorts, the best pure entertainment in recent years, cops a few Lucasoid licks on its way to becoming a girl power version of the trilogy. Perhaps it's sheer coincidence that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* revolves about the story of a beautiful princess, Jen (Ziyi Zhang), manipulated by a Darth Vaderesque female, Jade Fox (Pei-pei Chang); in love with Lo, a rascally outlaw (Chen Chang); tutored by Jedi-like soul warrior Li Mu Bai (Chow Yun-Fat); and given Yoda love by Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh). True, a great many fantasies contain variations on these elements. But there are a number of

clues, such as a bar scene with a distinctly *Star Wars*-ish feel, that lead me to believe this is no coincidence.

Similarities aside, however, *Dragon* stands in relation to Lucas's work as man does to the amoeba. Whereas *Star Wars* was all teenage whizbang gosharootie, *Dragon* manages to jam the essence of the original trilogy (minus, thankfully, any reference to club-wielding teddy bears) into slightly less than two hours, and replaces Lucas's juvenile humor with soulfulness and martial artistry taken to the level of ballet. It was director Ang Lee's (*The Ice Storm*, *Ride with the Devil*) stated intention to create an homage to the B-quality Chinese sword fantasies he watched as a child, films whose cultural niche was similar to that of our 1940s and '50s westerns. This tradition, previously dominated by pictures laden with

cheap effects that effected a burlesque of Chinese opera, has undergone a renaissance in recent years with the production of such films as *Storm Riders* and *A Man Called Hero*, big budget Hong Kong releases with special effects that rival those of *The Matrix* and featuring Ekin Cheng and Aaron Kwok, a pair of young actors verging on superstar status in the world of Asian cinema. *Riders* tells the story of the emperor of the "Martial Arts World" (veteran Japanese heavy, Sonny Chiba), the greatest swordsman of his time, who kills two great warriors and raises their sons as his own. The sons (Kwok and Cheng) have a falling out over the affections of the emperor's daughter, but unite in the end to defeat the evil emperor. The story is a marvel of complexity, tracking — in addition to the main thread — the fates of such characters as an oracular monk who pals around with a god disguised as a monkey, and a villager who cuts off his sword arm so it can replace the missing arm of one of the heroes. The magical duels, of which there are many, put to shame anything along these lines done to date by Hollywood — of special note is the final conflict which takes place in the "Sword Grave," a plot of malignant earth

in which the emperor plants the living swords of his numerous victims.

Hero marks a stylistic evolution of the genre, utilizing a non-linear narrative that cuts back and forth between China and America during the mid- and late-nineteenth century. The storyline of the movie is so complex, it would take a separate review to do it justice; but put succinctly, it is a generational saga involving father-and-son warriors and the resolution in America of enmities that began years before in China, treating of the exploitation of Chinese immigrants both by Americans and by their own people. The set pieces include an attack by magical shadows on the streets of Manhattan, a performance of traditional Chinese dance that masks the rescue of oppressed railroad workers, and a tremendous duel with magic and swords that takes place atop the Statue of Liberty. Until *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* happened along, this film established the high water mark for the Chinese version of high fantasy.

Both the aforementioned films are plotted hyperkinetically, with lots of twists and turns and subplots, and characters who often are not what they originally appear to

be. *Dragon*, relatively speaking, eschews complexity of this sort and uses two love stories to ground the action of the movie. One of these threads involves the unconsummated love between Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien, both of whom have rejected their personal desires in order to follow the path of duty and honor. The second thread treats of the volatile relationship between the bratty, rebellious Princess Jen and the outlaw Lo. This simplicity of story, so at variance with the convoluted structures of traditional sword flicks, may be the factor that has caused many Asians to dismiss the film as being aimed at a white audience. (Of course, if one accepts this assumption as true, it would logically follow that George Lucas's target audience for *Star Wars* was the Far East.) Another element that separates *Dragon* from its cousins is its loving attention to setting — not since *Lawrence of Arabia* have the story and landscape of a film heavy on action been so thoroughly intertwined (indeed, during *Dragon's* wonderful desert sequences, Oscar-winning cinematographer Peter Pau incorporates a number of visual quotes from David Lean's masterpiece); however, in *Dragon* there is a great variety of landscape, and setting is used to

reflect the characters' moods rather than, as is the case in *Lawrence*, to frame them. Then, too, there is the character of Princess Jen — she seems more contemporary riot grrrl than Ching Dynasty princess, willing to rebel against her life of privilege in order to seek personal freedom. But what ultimately elevates *Dragon* to the status of a masterpiece of its genre are the stunning fight sequences, most achieved not through wire work, as is customary in Hong Kong and in American films like *The Matrix*, but with the deft usage of CGI graphics. The initial sequence in which Yu Shu Lien chases the thief who has stolen the magical Jade Sword over the rooftops is likely to go down as one of the signature moments in the history of the cinema. It is the theft of the Jade Sword by a masked thief that ignites the plot, uniting Li Mu Bai — whose sword it is — and Yu Shu Lien in a hunt for the culprit, who turns out to be Princess Jen. The princess is being manipulated by the wizardly Jade Fox, who craves the sword for herself and is an old enemy of Li Mu Bai, having killed his teacher in the martial arts. Yu Shu Lien strives to lead Jen onto the path of virtue, but following a duel between the two and a flashback sequence that reprises the

inception of the love affair between the princess and the outlaw, Jen runs away. The pursuit of the princess and Jade Fox's attempts to shape events so as to bring down her old enemy, Li Mu Bai, comprise the remainder of the plot, but at the heart of the movie is the somber resolution of the relationship between Yu Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai, and its effect on Jen who, finally come to sober maturity by film's end, is then faced with a choice between love and a life of royal duty.

In most sword flicks, the acting is generally (to be kind) broad, but the actors in *Dragon* manage to raise the bar. Chow Yun-Fat's screen presence is as always possessed of enormous gravitas and Michelle Yeoh, the real star of the film, turns in an astonishingly subtle performance as Li Mu Bai's forlorn love and Jen's mentor. That Julia Roberts, an actress whose talents are best suited to commercials touting aids for vaginal dryness, should win an Oscar while Yeoh is left off the short list is a monumental idiocy of which only the Academy is capable. The mixture of rage, grief (over the death of Li Mu Bai), and compassion that Yeoh wordlessly conveys in her brief confrontation with Jen toward the end of the movie is

stunning. I have read a few critiques that describe her acting in *Dragon* as flat, but that, simply put, is ridiculous. The large part of her emotionality is externalized, announced by her actions, her gestures, and that is quite a difficult trick to pull off. For my mind, Yeoh's take on Yu Shu Lien is the most completely realized action performance I've seen for a couple of decades.

Looking back over the list of Hollywood's entries in the field of high fantasy films, a list that inspires shuddery flashbacks to experiences such as *Ladyhawke*, *Willow*, *Dragonheart*, *Conan the Barbarian*, *Legend*, *The Sword and the Sorcerer*, and *Dungeons and Dragons* (wherein the formerly redoubtable Jeremy Irons takes what may wind up being an irredeemable step into cinematic irrelevance), it's hard to come up with even one movie that belongs in the same league with those covered by this review, not to mention others that spring to mind: *Heroic Trio* (also featuring Michelle Yeoh); Wang Kar-wai's existentialist revision of the genre, *Ashes of Time*; Tsui Hark's *Chinese Ghost Story*; and Zu, *Warriors of the Magic Mountain*, to name but a few. Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* is a borderline qualifier. And if we extend the parameters of the genre

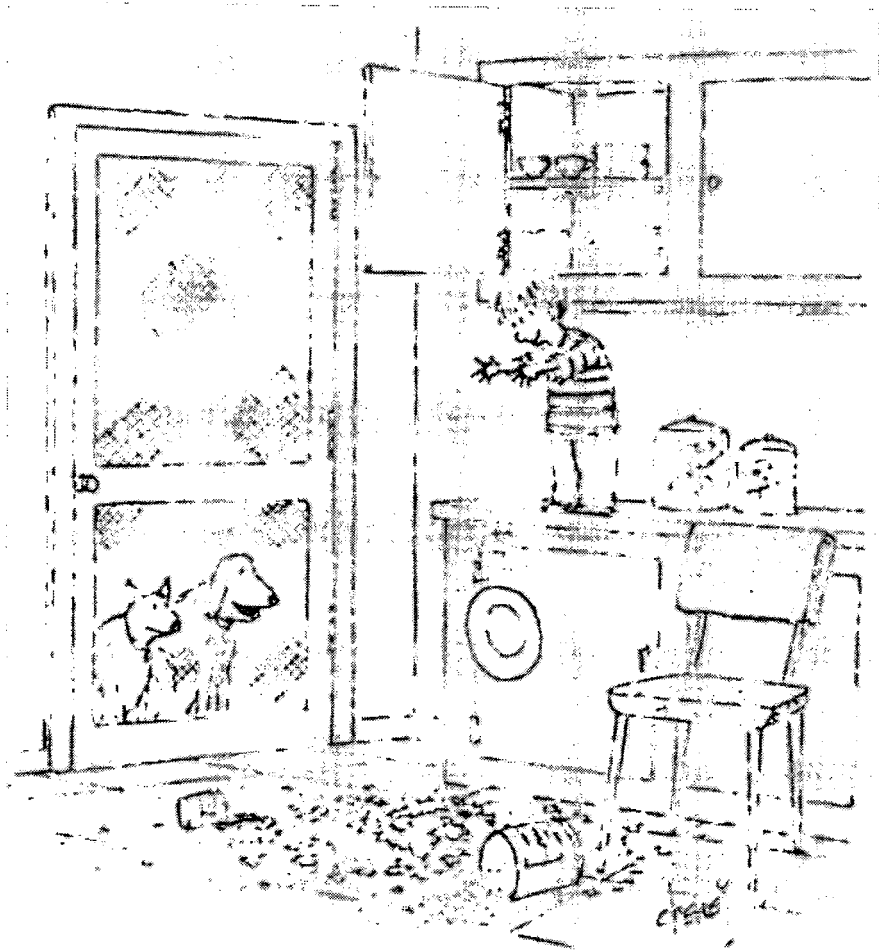
a bit so as to include films like *Time Bandits* and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, then we might add a few contenders; but otherwise the view is bleak. Perhaps the release of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* will overcome this lack, but it is nonetheless curious that, given their technical and acting resources, and the wealth of source material available, the studios have failed the genre to such a resounding degree. It may be that American filmmakers have no great feel for a tradition that does not mirror their own country's traditions. This said, one wonders why no one has yet tried to make a film from Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series (a chronicle that first saw light in *F&SF*), which retells *The Song of Roland* from the standpoint of a mythical gunslinger, a purely American icon.

It's inevitable that *Dragon*, what with its financial success, will spawn imitations...and then again, maybe not. If the strikes threatened by the Writer's and Screen Actors' Guilds go forward, the studios will be unable to obey their cretinous instincts for quite some time, and instead of having to watch shabby imitations, we will be afflicted with shelf-sitting films that the tasteless arbiters of Hollywood culture decided were not good

enough to distribute. Given the average quality of product in release, this prospect borders on the obscene. Some of these films (most horribly and imminently notable, the racing movie *Driven*, starring Sly Stallone) are already coming off the shelves, and God only knows what gems of high fantasy have been gathering dust in studio archives. Could we be in store for another giddy romp with that cheesy crescent-moon-headed devil guy in *Legend 2*? Will *Daughter of Ladyhawke* lay an enormous egg (I like Drew Barrymore for the part — she could pass for Rutger Hauer's outside child)? Might Schwarzenegger return as *Conan the Right Wing Intellectual*? Will *Kull* kum again? Far better to stay at home and rewatch *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* or any one of a number of other good Asian fantasy flicks than to risk the soul-death brought on by viewing one too many rotten displays of celluloid witch-mages, overgrown iguanas, and urping trolls who resemble Ernest Borgnine emerging from a mud bath. But whether or not the strikes occur, until some consciousness-changing event occurs to influence the tendencies of American high fantasy films, the marquee of any theater showing such woeful efforts as we

have become accustomed to should not bother listing the title of the movie, but spell out instead the cliché that has been stated

explicitly or implicitly in so many less than magnificent literary fantasies: Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here. ♣



"Yeah, I'll probably take the heat for it, but I love his work."

The mirror reflects, but it also reverses. Robert Sheckley's new story has several interesting twists and turns of its own...

Mirror Games

By Robert Sheckley

EDWARDS WAS THE ONLY tourist off the cruise space ship. This was neither the year nor the season for Alcenor. Trendy people went to the

Rim Worlds. Those with a taste for adventure tried out Hotar or Leni, primitive planets with plenty of flora and fauna and little or no civilization. Food lovers went to Gastor IV, where skilled chefs turn the local produce into delicious concoctions. Lovers went to the twin moons of Askenai. Only those crazed by loss and grief went to Alcenor.

After he cleared customs and immigration at Alcenor, Edwards saw, in the Hall of Arrivals, gigantic mirrors showing typical sights from some of Alcenor's tourist zones. There was Roppo, an island in the south Sclemerian Sea, green and lush and famous for its white sand beaches, its many restaurants, and its underwater grottoes, where, in scuba gear, you could meet the Osculti, an intelligent underwater race long resident on the planet. You might even take tea with them in a watery interzone, since the Osculti are famous for their hospitality.

This was not what Edwards had come for, however. He was not here

to sightsee, not until and unless he could do so with Elena. But Elena was dead, and all that remained of her was her image, captured in the old hand mirror that she had been looking into just before death came to her suddenly, that last day of her life on Earth.

On Earth, death is irrevocable. But in Alcenor, Edwards had been told, it was sometimes reversible — especially if a mirror had been involved at the time of passing. You couldn't return to your body: but you could pass into a mirror, there to live indefinitely.

The people of Alcenor were the great scientists of mirrors, and unusual effects were possible with mirrors here. This was due to the somewhat different properties of matter locally, to say nothing of a slightly different space-time setup.

Others have written extensively about these matters. Edwards had only a layman's interest.... No, not even that. All he wanted was his Elena back, or to rejoin her, and he didn't care how the thing was managed. Science or magic, it mattered not to him as long as he got the result he sought.

It was inevitable that he met Lobo immediately after clearing customs. Lobo was loitering in the hall of arrivals, a tall, sandy-haired young man with the look of a street arab. He was there to meet new arrivals, find them hotel rooms, recommend restaurants, and suggest other services.

Spotting the tags on his luggage, Lobo came up to Edwards, and addressed him with the jaunty insouciance of his breed.

"You want a woman, am I right? Sir, you've come to the right planet and the gods of fortune have steered you to the right man, for I have respectful contact with many ladies of surprising loveliness and unassailable virtue. The particular one I have in mind for you, honored sir, has secondary sexual characteristics of a universally approved type and has been saving herself for an Earthman of a certain right sort, exactly which sort to be left up to my own judgment. In my view, sir, you are that man. There is no money involved in this, though you might like to buy the lady a nice dinner at a reasonable price, perhaps a bedroom banquet as we call it, catered by my cousin, Tomas of The Frying Pan — "

Edwards had been waiting for a break in this non-stop flow of specious sounding verbiage. Now, disregarding manners, he broke in anyhow.

"No, no, no!" he said. "I do not want a woman!"

Lobo raised sandy eyebrows. "A boy? Or perhaps a creature of an entirely different species from your own? We have a guest race here in Alcenor who are famed for their pulchritude, even though it does take some getting used to...."

"I'm not interested!" Edwards cried. "I only want my Elena!"

Trying to understand, Lobo said, "This Elena — did you by chance bring her with you?"

Edwards nodded. He opened his backpack and took out a large narrow leather case, zipped it open and showed, nesting in it, a small silver-backed mirror.

"I have her here," Edwards said. "This is what she looked at last."

Lobo nodded in instant comprehension. "So she still lives in the mirror!"

"Not on Earth," Edwards said. "But perhaps here in Alcenor —"

"On Alcenor," Lobo said, "anything is possible — as long as it involves mirrors."

"So I have heard," Edwards said.

"As it turns out, I can help you," Lobo said. "You are very lucky to have met me."

"You can bring her back to life yourself?"

"No. But I know someone who can."

Edwards took a room for a week in a smart but modestly priced hotel recommended by Lobo. Once alone in his room, he unpacked, propped the mirror up at the dressing table, and sat down to write a letter to Elena.

He told her that he had never realized how lonely life could be without her, how unsatisfying, how bleak. He said that he knew he hadn't always been good toward her, and, especially toward the end, had been impatient, insulting, even violent. All that was over now, he assured her. It had been a temporary madness, brought on by too much love, not a deficiency of it. As proof, she should consider the steps he was taking to rejoin her. He ended by writing that he had every expectation of meeting her again very soon.

The letter completed, he held it up to the mirror, waiting until he was sure the mirror had absorbed it. Then he carefully packed away the letter and the mirror, and went to bed.

Finally Lobo came to him. "I have the perfect person! Come, we need to talk to her at once, before she leaves town again."

"Where is she going that's so important?"

"Mirrors in different parts of our planet have different properties. Elia has vowed to study them all, to penetrate to the deepest secrets of mirrors, to bring out the full properties of mirrors whether by the white light of science or the black light of mysticism."

THE NEXT DAY, Lobo brought him to meet Elia, a witch woman skilled in all aspects of mirrors. Elia lived alone in furnished rooms in one of the poorer quarters that had sprung up around the spaceport. She was a tall, grave woman. She listened to Edwards's request, examined the mirror, and said she thought something could be done. Elena could not be resuscitated from the mirror. That was beyond the present abilities of anyone on Alcenor. But Edwards could, with suitable preparation, enter the mirror himself, and, living, rejoin the living Elena.

There would be a charge in money, of course, payable in advance; and another, perhaps graver cost in that he would have to give up his current, corporeal life, which would cease the moment he entered the mirror.

Edward said he was well content. Elia said she needed to do some work on the mirror, to peel off some of the images that had accumulated on it since Elena's death, so as to facilitate Edwards's passage.

The next day, Lobo came around to see how Elia was doing.

"So how is it going?" Lobo asked.

"All right. A few of the images are a little tenacious. I'm having difficulty peeling them away. Nothing I can't handle, however. But this whole thing is a little puzzling."

"Why do you say that?"

"This woman, this Elena — you say he loves her very much?"

"Very much! That is why he has come all the way to Alcenor — to be with her again."

"That's what I thought. It's the puzzling part."

"Could you explain further?"

"If he loves her so much," Elia said. "Why did he kill her?"

"What are you talking about?"

"His image is right there in the mirror with hers. It's the last image made on Earth. It shows Edwards strangling her."

"You are sure of this?"

"You can see for yourself. I have set up the image in a copy mirror."

"No, don't bother showing me. I take your word for it."

"And what about the other man?"

"I know nothing about another man."

"There is another man in the mirror," Elia said. "From the scenes I have peeled, she appears to have loved him, too."

"Damnation! What happened to the other man?"

"He appears to have been killed, too. Someone shot him with a handgun."

"Who?"

"Our client, Edwards, I suppose. But the mirror does not reveal this. This other man is in the mirror, too."

"Well.... It is none of our business."

"I agree. Edwards is our client, and we are neither the police nor the moral authorities. There is perhaps a perfectly reasonable explanation for what happened. But I shall have to ask him a few questions."

"I don't understand why."

"First, to ascertain whether, in light of what I have seen, he still wants to go into the mirror. And secondly, to secure our payment before he does so."

"You said yourself we are not the moral authorities."

"It presents a personal moral problem. You should never have brought this man here!"

"You told me to bring customers. You yourself advised me to work the spaceport."

"But I thought you would use a little discretion, a little judgment."

"What does it matter what you thought? You and I wanted income, and we have it now."

"But also a problem."

"Consider the problem the price you pay for the income."

"And what about my moral dilemma?"

"If it bothers you so badly, you can always tell him to go away."

"No, I can't do that, either. I am bound by the vows to my profession to continue this thing once I have accepted the assignment. I shall have to take it up with Edwards."

"Saw that, did you?" Edwards said after Elia told him what she had seen in the mirror. "Well, it was all a misunderstanding. I never meant to hurt Elena. I love her! It's just that I have a violent temper. But I have it under control now. When I see her, I can explain everything. She will understand. She has always understood me, always loved me."

"So you still want to go into the mirror to join her?"

"More than ever!"

"And it makes no difference that there is another man there?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw another man in the mirror. A man who had died violently."

"Yes, of course. That would be Rodgers."

"And he presents no problem for you?"

"Rodgers was a mistake," Edwards said.

Elia nodded.

"He shouldn't have been there in the first place. In Elena's apartment, I mean. Pestering her. Confusing her. If he had gone quietly away, as I told him to, all that unpleasantness could have been avoided."

"But he did not go away."

"No, he did not. He said he loved her. And the silly girl thought for a while she was in love with him." Edwards laughed. "As if she could ever love anyone but me! We were made for each other, Elena and I, and we both said so, back in the wonderful days at the start of our relationship."

"I see," Elia said.

"I told her then that I was a serious person. I was a person who loved once and forever. I told her I would always love her, in this world and in the next. I didn't know about mirrors then, but of course I meant in any mirror world, too. She said she loved me the same way. But time passed, there was the matter of my violence, there was Rodgers with his blandishments, and she became confused."

"I understand," Elia said. "But do you think that now, especially in light of you having killed her, that her feelings for you will be the same?"

"I am sure of it. If she had killed me, I would forgive her and continue to love her. I can expect no less of her."

"Your love is very noble," Elia said. "But what about this Rodgers? Will not his being there prove an impediment?"

"An unimportant one," Edwards said. "I killed him once. If necessary, I'll do it again. Nothing will stand in the way of my love!"

"I think I understand it all now," Elia said.

Edwards got to his feet. He was a very large man. The expression on his face was not pleasant as he said, "You are going to put me into the mirror, aren't you?"

"There is no doubt of that," Elia said. "There is merely the matter of payment to take care of first."

Edwards pulled out his billfold and began to lay out large denomination bills in Alcensor currency. After a while, Elia held up her hand. "That is enough."

"I can give more."

"No. This is quite enough. We will put you into the mirror this evening, after I have made a few final arrangements."

"You won't disappoint me now?" Edwards said.

"You will not be disappointed."

THAT EVENING, in front of the mirror, Edwards followed Elia's instructions and felt his body collapse behind him. He had a moment of panic as his life seemed to slide away. Then he was in the mirror.

The first thing he noted was that he still seemed to be in his body. He grasped his forearm. He could feel himself, he was solid, real. Perhaps he was only an image now, but to himself and to other images he was real. He looked around. He remembered this room. It was the room in which he had seen Elena for the last time, back on Earth. And now he would see her again. He turned quickly — He had caught a glimpse of someone — Elena! Yes, it was her!

She was standing in a mirrored doorway, and she was smiling at him.

"Elena, darling," he said. "I'm so sorry I killed you. Believe me, it won't happen again."

She was still smiling, but she didn't answer. He had never seen her

look so beautiful. He walked toward her. There she was, just inside a mirrored doorway. He passed through the doorway himself. "Elena?"

She was just a little ahead of him. He passed through another doorway, and another beyond that. There seemed to be a lot of doorways around here, and standing in each of them was Elena, smiling at him.

"Playing games with me?" he asked. "Never mind, there are a lot of doors here, but I have a lot of time. I will find you, my darling, I promise you that." He moved on, following Elena's image, into the deeper complications of the maze.

Afterward, Lobo asked Elia how she knew Edwards would go into the mirror maze, the small mirrored box with its endless reflected passages that she had put into view on a small table behind Edwards.

"I baited it," Elia said. "With this." She showed him a small mirror. Lobo looked at the image of a beautiful young girl.

"She was younger then," Elia said. "This image must be from before she met Edwards. I pulled this from the mirror."

"You put that image in the maze?"

"Precisely. I couldn't leave Edwards in the mirror to terrorize those two young people."

Lobo considered, watching the tiny figure of Edwards moving through the mirrored rooms. "Can he ever get out?"

Elia shook her head. "A true mirror maze has an entrance but no exit."

Lobo whistled softly to himself. "So he is to wander there forever."

"Or until something finds him."

Lobo looked at her quizzically.

"Mirror mazes are uncanny places. They can generate the unexpected. But even wandering in a maze cannot go on forever."

"But what if Elena and the other man go into the maze themselves?"

"Against some eventualities there is no prevention. If either or both of them go into the maze, we can only say they will get what is coming to them."

"You play rough," Lobo said, a note of admiration in his voice.

"Rough but fair. And now, my young friend, it is time to split the money."



Laird Barron was born in Palmer, Alaska, and raised on a remote wilderness parcel. Once a professional Iditarod competitor, he is a writer nowadays, with fiction and verse appearing in many online journals. He lives in Seattle, where he studies such topics as ancient warfare and medieval diplomacy. He is currently at work on a novel entitled The Stratagem of Coils.

Around these parts, the year 2001 has not brought as many science fiction stories as we'd like, but we've had a bumper crop of horror tales. What follows is one of the creepiest we've seen.

Shiva, Open Your Eye

By Laird Barron

THE HUMAN CONDITION
can be summed up in a drop of blood.
Show me a *teaspoon* of blood and
I will reveal to thee the ineffable na-

nure of the cosmos, naked and squirming.

Squirming. Funny how the truth always seems to do that when you shine a light on it.

A man came to my door one afternoon, back when I lived on a rambling farm in Eastern Washington. He was sniffing around, poking into things best left...unpoked. A man with a flashlight, you might say.

Of course, I knew who he was and what he was doing there long before he arrived with his hat in one hand and phony story in the other.

Claimed he was a state property-assessor, did the big genial man. Indeed, he was a massive fellow — thick blunt fingers clutching corroborative documents and lumpy from all the abuse he had subjected them to in the military; he draped an ill-tailored tweed jacket and insufferable slacks over his ponderous frame. This had the effect of making him look like a man who should have been on a beach with a sun visor and a metal

detector. The man wore a big smile under his griseous beard. This smile frightened people, which is exactly why he used it most of the time, and also, because it frightened people, he spoke slowly, in a big, heavy voice that sounded as if it emerged from a cast-iron barrel. He smelled of cologne and three-in-one oil.

I could have whispered to him that the cologne came from a fancy emerald-colored bottle his wife had purchased for him as a birthday present; that he carried the bottle in his travel bag and spritzed himself whenever he was on the road and in too great a hurry, or simply too hungover to take a shower. He preferred scotch, did my strapping visitor. I could have mentioned several other notable items in this patent leather travel bag — a roll of electrical tape, brass knuckles, voltmeter, police issue handcuffs, a micro-recorder, a pocket camera, disposable latex gloves, lockpicks, a carpet cutter, flashlight, an empty aspirin bottle, toothpaste, a half roll of antacid tablets, hemorrhoid suppositories and a stained road map of Washington State. The bag was far away on the front seat of his rented sedan, which he had carefully parked up the winding dirt driveway under a sprawling locust tree. Wisely, he had decided to reconnoiter the area before knocking on the door. The oil smell emanated from a lubricated and expertly maintained thirty-eight-caliber revolver stowed in his left-hand jacket pocket. The pistol had not been fired in three and a half years. The man did not normally carry a gun on the job, but in my case, he had opted for discretion. It occurred to him that I might be dangerous.

I could have told him all these things and that he was correct in his assumptions, but it did not amuse me to do so. Besides, despite his bulk he looked pretty fast, and I was tired. Winter makes me lazy. It makes me torpid.

But —

Rap, rap! Against the peeling frame of the screen door. He did not strike the frame with anything approaching true force; nonetheless, he used a trifle more vigor than the occasion required. This was how he did things — whether conducting a sensitive inquiry, bracing a recalcitrant witness, or ordering the prawns at La Steakhouse. He was a water buffalo floundering into the middle of a situation, seizing command and dominating by virtue of his presence.

I made him wait longer than was necessary — to the same degree as his assault on my door was designed to set the tone and mood — although not *too* long, because sometimes my anticipatory juices outwrestle my subtler nature. I was an old man, and thus tended to move in a deliberate mode anyway. This saddened me; I was afraid he might not catch my little joke.

But —

I came to the door, blinking in the strong light as I regarded him through the filtering mesh. Of course, I permitted a suitable quaver to surface when I asked after his business. That was when the big man smiled and rumbled a string of lies about being the land assessor and a few sundries that I never paid attention to, lost as I was in watching his mouth, his hands, and the curious way his barrel chest lifted and fell under the crumpled suit.

He gave me a name; something unimaginative gleaned from a shoe box, or like so. The identity on his State of Washington Private Investigator's License read Murphy Connell. He had been an investigator for eleven years; worked for himself, married, with two children — a boy who played football at the University of Washington, and a girl who had transferred to Rhode Island to pursue a degree in graphic design — and was the owner of a heavy-set Rottweiler named Hellestrae, after his favorite linesman. The identification was in his wallet, which filled an inner pocket of the bad coat, wedged in front of an ancient pack of Pall-Malls. The big man had picked up the habit when he was stationed in the Philippines, but seldom smoked anymore. He kept them around because sure as a stud hound lifts its leg to piss, the minute he left home without a pack, the craving would pounce on him hammer and tongs. He was not prone to self-analysis, this big man, yet it amused him after a wry sense that he had crushed an addiction only to be haunted by its vengeful ghost.

Yes, I remembered his call from earlier that morning. He was certainly welcome to ramble about the property and have a gander for Uncle Sam. I told him to come in and rest his feet while I fixed a pot of tea — unless he preferred a nip of the ole gin? No, tea would be lovely. *Lovely?* It delighted me in an arcane fashion that such a phrase would uproot from his tongue — sort of like a gravel truck dumping water lilies and butterflies. I boiled tea with these hands gnarled unto dead madrona, and

I took my sweet time. Mr. Connell moved quietly, though that really didn't matter, *nothing* is hidden from these ears. I listened while he sifted through a few of the papers on the coffee table — *nothing of consequence there, my large one* — and efficiently riffled the books and *National Geographics* on the sagging shelf that I had meant to fix for a while. His eyes were quick, albeit in a different sense than most people understand the word. They were quick in the sense that a straight line is quick, no waste, no second-guessing, thorough and methodical. Once scrutinized and done. Quick.

I returned in seven minutes with the tea steeping in twin mugs. He had tossed the dim living room and was wondering how to distract me for a go at the upstairs — or the cellar. I knew better than to make it blatantly simple; he was the suspicious type, and if his wind got up too soon.... Well, that would diminish my chance to savor our time together. Christmas, this was Christmas, or rather, the approximation of that holiday, which fills children to the brim with stars and song. But Christmas is not truly the thing, is it now? That sublime void of giddy anticipation of the gaily wrapped packages contains the first, and dare I say, righteous spirit of Christmas. Shucking the presents of their skin is a separate pleasure altogether.

But —

Mr. Connell sat in the huge stuffed La-Z-Boy with springs poking him in the buttocks. It was the only chair in the room that I trusted to keep him off the floor, and it cawed when he settled his bulk into its embrace. Let me say that our man was not an actor. Even after I sat him down and placed the mug in his fist, those accipitrine eyes darted and sliced from shadowed corner to mysterious nook, offput by the cloying feel of the room — and why not? It was a touch creepy, what with the occasional creak of a timber, the low squeak of a settling foundation, the way everything was cast under a counterchange pattern of dark and light. I would have been nervous in his shoes; he was looking into murders most foul, after all. Pardon me, murder is a sensational word; television will be the ruin of my fleeting measure of proportion if the world keeps spinning a few more revolutions. *Disappearances* is what I should have said. Thirty of them. Thirty that good Mr. Connell knew of, at least. There were more, many more, but this is astray from the subject.

We looked at each other for a time. Me, smacking my lips over toothless gums and blowing on the tea — it was too damned hot, as usual! He, pretending to sip, but not really doing so on the off chance that I was the crazed maniac that he sought, and had poisoned it. A good idea, even though I had not done anything like that. Since he was pretending to accept my hospitality, I pretended to look at his forged documents, smacking and fumbling with some glasses that would have driven me blind if I wore them for any span of time, and muttered monosyllabic exclamations to indicate my confusion and ultimate verification of the presumed authenticity of his papers. One quick call to the Bureau of Land Management would have sent him fleeing as the charlatan I knew he was. I ignored the opportunity.

Mr. Connell was definitely not an actor. His small talk was clumsy, as if he couldn't decide the proper way to crack me. I feigned a hearing impairment and that was cruel, though amusing. Inside of ten minutes the mechanism of his logic had all save rejected the possibility of my involvement in those disappearances. No surprise there — he operated on intuition; *peripheral logic*, as his wife often called it. I failed the test of instinct. Half blind, weak, pallid as a starfish grounded. Decrepit would not be completely unkind. I was failing him. Yet the room, the house, the brittle fold of plain beyond the window interrupted by a blot of ramshackle structure that was the barn, invoked his disquiet. It worried him, this trail of missing persons — vague pattern; they were hitchhikers, salesmen, several state troopers, missionaries, prostitutes, you name it. Both sexes, all ages and descriptions, with a single thread to bind them. They disappeared around my humble farm. The Federal Bureau of Investigation dropped by once, three years before the incident with Mr. Connell. I did not play with them. Winter had yet to make me torpid and weak. They left with nothing, suspecting nothing.

However, it was a close thing, that inconvenient visit. That convinced me the hour was nigh....

The tea grew cold. It was late in the year, so dying afternoon sunlight had a tendency to slant, trees were shorn of their glory, crooked branches casting crooked shadows. The breeze nipped and the fields were damp. I mentioned that he was going to ruin his shoes if he went tramping out there; he thanked me and said he'd be careful. I watched him stomp

around, doing his terrible acting job, trying to convince me that he was checking the value of my property, or whatever the hell he had said when I wasn't listening.

Speaking of shadows...I glanced at mine, spread out across the hood of the requisite '59 Chevrolet squatting between the barn and the house. Ah, perfectly normal, if disfigured by the warp of light.

A majority of the things I might tell are secrets. Therefore, I shall not reveal them whole and glistening. Also, some things are kept from me, discomfiting as that particular truth may be. The vanished people; I know *what* occurred, but not *why*. To be brutally accurate, in several cases I cannot say that I *saw* what happened; however, my guesswork is as good as anyone else's. There was a brief moment, back and back again in some murky prehistory of my refined consciousness, when I possessed the hubris to imagine a measure of self-determination in this progress through existence. The Rough Beast Slouching toward Bethlehem of its own accord. If leashed, then by its own device, certainly. Foolish me.

Scientists claim that there is a scheme to the vicious Tree of Life, one thing eats another and excretes the matter another being requires to sustain its spark so that it might be eaten by another which excretes the matter required to sustain the spark — And like so. Lightning does not strike with random intent, oceans do not heave and toss, axes do not ring in the tulgy wood or bells in church towers by accident. As a famous man once said, there are no accidents 'round here.

Jerk the strings and watch us dance. I could say more on that subject; indeed, I might fill a pocketbook with that pearl of wisdom, but later is better.

Mr. Connell slouched in from the field — picking about for graves, by chance? — resembling the rough beast I mentioned earlier. He was flushed; irritation and residual alcohol poisoning in equal parts. I asked him how he was doing, and he grunted a perfunctory comment.

Could he possibly take a closer look at the barn? It would affect the overall property value and like that...I smiled and shrugged and offered to show him the way. Watch your step, I warned him, it wouldn't do for a government man to trip over some piece of equipment and end up suing the dirt from under my feet, ha, ha.

This made him nervous all over again. Why? Two years before this

visit, I could have said with confidence. He would have been mine to read forward and back. By then, I was losing my strength. I was stuck in *his* boat, stranded with peripheral logic for sails. Mr. Connell sweated all the time; this was different. Fear musk is distinctive, any predator will tell you that. The fear musk superseded the powerful cologne and the stale odor of whiskey leaching from his pores.

To the barn. Cavernous. Gloom, dust, clathrose awnings of spent silk, scrabbling mice. Heavy textures of mold, of rust, decaying straw. I hobbled with the grace of a lame crow, yet Mr. Connell contrived to lag at my heel. Cold in the barn, thus his left hand delved into a pocket and lingered there. What was he thinking? Partially that I was too old, unless...unless an accomplice lurked in one of the places his methodical gaze was barred from. He thought of the house, upstairs, or the cellar. *Wrong on both counts*. Maybe his research was faulty — what if I actually possessed a living relative? Now would be a hell of a time to discover *that* mistake! Mr. Connell thought as an animal does — a deer hardly requires proof from its stippled ears, its soft eyes, or quivering nose to justify the uneasiness of one often hunted. Animals understand that life is death. This is not a conscious fact, rather a fact imprinted upon every colliding cell. Mr. Connell thought like an animal; unfortunately, he was trapped in the electrochemical web of cognition, wherein curiosity leads into temptation, temptation leads into fear, and fear is considered an impulse to be mastered. He came into the barn against the muffled imprecations of his lizard brain. Curiosity did not kill the cat all by itself.

His relentless eyes adjusted by rapid degrees, fastening upon a mass of sea-green tarpaulin gone velvet in the subterranean illume. This sequestered mass reared above the exposed gulf of loft, nearly brushing the venerable center-beam, inexpressive in its obscured context, though immense and bounded by that gravid force to founding dirt. Mr. Connell's heartbeat accelerated, spurred by a trickling dose of primordial dread. Being a laconic and linear man, he asked me what was under that great tarp.

I showed my gums, grasping a corner of that shroud with a knotted hand. One twitch to part the curtain of enigma and reveal my portrait of divinity. A sculpture of the magnificent shape of God. Oh, admittedly it was a shallow rendering of that which cannot be named; but art is not

relative to perfection in any tangible sense. It is our coarse antennae trembling blindly as it traces the form of Origin, tastes the ephemeral glue welding us, yearning after the secret of ineluctable evolution, and wonders what this transformation will mean. In my mind, here was the best kind of art — the kind hoarded by rich and jealous collectors in their locked galleries. Hidden from the eyes of the heathen masses, waiting to be shared with the ripe few.

The rustle of polyurethane sloughing from the Face of Creation; a metaphor to frame the abrupt molting bloom of my deep insides. There, a shadow twisted on the floor; my shadow, but not me any more than a butterfly is the chrysalis from whence it emerges. Yet, I wanted to see the end of this!

Mr. Connell looked upon the construct born of that yearning for truth slithering at the root of my intellect. He teetered as if swaying on the brink of a chasm. He beheld shuddering lines that a fleshly tongue is witless to describe, except perhaps in spurts of impression — prolonged, splayed at angles, an obliquangular mass of smeared and clotted material, glaucous clay dredged from an old and abiding coomb where earthly veins dangle and fell waters drip as the sculpture dripped, milky-lucent starshine in the cryptic barn, an intumescent hulk rent from the floss of a carnival mirror. To gaze fully on this idol was to feel the gray matter quake inside its case and reject what the moist perceptions thought to feed it.

I cannot explain, nor must an artist defend his work or elucidate in such a way the reeling audience can fathom, brutes that they are. Besides, I was not feeling quite myself when I molded it from the morass of mindless imperative. Like a nocturnal flower, I *Become*, and after that the scope of human perception is reduced and bound in fluids nameless and profane. There are memories, but their clarity is the clarity of a love for the womb, warmth, and lightless swimming. Fragmented happiness soon absorbed in the shuffle of the churning world and forgotten.

Mr. Connell did not comment directly. Speech was impossible. He uttered an inarticulate sound, yarding at the lump of cold metal in his pocket — his crucifix against the looming presence of evil. Note that I refrain from scoffing at the existence of evil. The word is a simple name for a complex idea, an idea far outstripping the feeble equipment of sapient life. It is nothing to laugh at. As for my investigator, I like to remember

him that way — frozen in a rictus of anguish at wisdom gained too late. Imagine that instant as the poor insect falls into the pitcher plant. He was an Ice-Age hunter trapped in the gelid bosom of a glacier. It was final for him.

I reached out to touch his craggy visage —

My perceptions flickered, shuttering so swiftly that I could not discern precise details of what occurred to big Mr. Connell. Suffice to say what was done to him was...incomprehensible. And horrible, I suppose most people would think. Not that I could agree with their value judgment. I suffered the throes of blossoming. It tends to affect my reasoning. The ordeal exhausted me, yet another sign.

Mr. Connell vanished like the others before him, but he was the last. After that, I left the farm and traveled north. Winter was on the world. Time for summer things to sleep.

I only mention this anecdote because it's the same thing every time; in one variation or another. Come the villagers with their pitchforks and torches, only to find the castle empty, the nemesis gone back to the shadowlands. Lumbered off to the great cocoon of slumber and regeneration.

In dreams I swim as I did back when the oceans were warm and empty. There I am, floating inside a vast membrane, innocent of coherent thought, guided by impulses to movement, sustenance, and copulation. Those are dim memories; easy to assume them to be the fabrications of loneliness or delusion. Until you recall these are human frailties. Interesting that I always return to the soup of origins, whether in dreams or substance. Every piece of terrestrial life emerged from that steaming gulf. The elder organisms yet dwell in those depths, some hiding in the fields of microbes, mindless as jellyfish; others lumbering and feeding on what hapless forms they capture. Once, according to the dreams, I was one of those latter things. Except, I am uncertain if that was ever my true spawning ground.

In fairness, I do not ponder the circumstance of my being as much as logic would presume. My physiology is to thank, perhaps. There come interludes — a month, a year, centuries, or more — and I simply am, untroubled by the questions of purpose. I seek my pleasures, I revel in their

comforts. The ocean is just the ocean, a cigar is just a cigar. That is the state of Becoming.

Bliss is ephemeral; true for anyone, or anything. The oceans have been decimated several times in the last billion years. Sterile water in a clay bowl. Life returned unbidden on each occasion. The world slumbers, twitches and transforms. From the jelly, lizards crawled around the fetid swamps eating one another and dying, and being replaced by something else. Again, again, again, until you reach the inevitable conclusion of sky-rises, nuclear submarines, orbiting satellites, and Homo sapiens fornicating the Earth. God swipes His Hand across Creation, it changes shape and thrives. A cycle, indeed a cycle, and not a pleasant one if you are cursed with a brain and the wonder of what the cosmic gloaming shall hold for you.

Then there is me. Like the old song, the more things change, the more I stay the same.

When the oceans perished, I slept and later flopped on golden shores, glaring up at strange constellations, but my contemplation was a drowsy process and bore no fruit. When the lizards perished, I went into the sea and slept, and later wore the flesh and fur of warm-blooded creatures. When ice chilled and continents drifted together with dire results, I went into the sea and slept through the cataclysm. Later, I wore the skins of animals and struck flint to make fire and glared up at the stars and named them in a language I don't have the trick of anymore. Men built their idols, and I joined them in their squalid celebrations, lulled by flames and roasting flesh; for I was one with them, even if the thoughts stirring in my mind seemed peculiar, and hearkened to the sediment of dark forms long neglected. I stabbed animals with a spear and mated when the need was pressing. I hated my enemies and loved my friends and wore the values of the tribe without the impetus of subterfuge. I was a man. And for great periods that is all I was. At night I regarded the flickering lights in the sky and when I dreamed, it occurred to me exactly what the truth was. For a while I evaded the consequences of my nature. Time is longer than a person made from blood and tissue could hope to imagine. Ask God; distractions are important.

But —

Memories, memories. Long ago in a cave on the side of a famous

mountain in the Old World. Most men lived in huts and cabins or stone fortresses. Only wise men chose to inhabit caves, and I went to visit one of them. A monk revered for his sagacity and especially for his knowledge of the gods in their myriad incarnations. I stayed with the wizened holy man for a cycle of the pocked and pitted moon. We drank bitter tea; we smoked psychedelic plants and read from crumbling tomes scriven with quaint drawings of deities and demons. It was disappointing — I could not be any of these things, yet there was little doubt he and I were different as a fish is from a stone. The monk was the first of them to notice. I did not concern myself. In those days my power was irresistible; let me but wave my hand and so mote it be. If I desired a thought from a passing mind, I plucked it fresh as sweet fruit from a budding branch. If I fancied a soothing rain, the firmament would split and sunder. If I hungered, flesh would prostrate itself before me...unless I fancied a pursuit. Then it would bound and hide, or stand and bare teeth or rippling steel, or suffocate my patience with tears, oaths, pleas. But in the end, I had my flesh. That the monk guessed what I strove to submerge, as much from myself as the world at large, did not alarm me. It was the *questions* that pecked at my waking thoughts, crept into my slumberous phantasms. Annoying questions.

Stark recollection of a time predating the slow glide of eons in the primeval brine. The images would alight unasked; I would glimpse the red truth of my condition. Purple dust and niveous spiral galaxy, a plain of hyaline rock broken by pyrgoidal clusters ringed in fire, temperatures sliding a groove betwixt boiling and freezing. The sweet huff of methane in my bellowing lungs, sunrise so blinding it would have seared the eyes from any living creature...and I knew there were memories layered behind and beyond, inaccessible to the human perception that I wore as a workman wears boots, gloves, and warding mantle. To see these visions in their nakedness would boggle and baffle, or rive the sanity from my fragile intellect, surely as a hot breath douses a candle. Ah, but there were memories; a phantom chain endless as the coil of chemicals comprising the mortal genome, fused to the limits of calculation —

I try not to think too much. I try not to think too much about the buried things, anyhow. Better to consider the cycle that binds me in its thrall. For my deeds there is a season — spring, summer, autumn and

winter. Each time I change it becomes clearer what precisely maintains its pattern. That I am a fragment of something much larger is obvious. The monk was the first to grasp it. There was a story he mentioned — how the priests prayed to their gods, good and bad, to look upon men and bestow their munificent blessings. They even prayed to terrible Shiva the Destroyer, who slept in his celestial palace. They prayed because to slight Shiva in their supplication was to risk his not inconsiderable fury. Yet, the priests knew if Shiva opened his eye and gazed upon the world it would be destroyed.

But —

In the spring, I walk with the others of my kindred shell, nagged by fullness unsubstantiated.

In the summer, I see my shadow change, change and then I learn to blossom and suckle the pleasurable nectar from all I survey. Nail me to a cross, burn me in a fire. A legend will rise up from the ashes. Invent stories to frighten your children, sacrifice tender young virgins to placate my concupiscent urge. Revile me in your temples, call upon Almighty God to throw me down. No good, no good. How could He see you if not for me? How could He hear thy lament, or smell thy sadness? Or taste thee?

In the autumn, like a slow, heavy tide, purpose resurges, and I remember what the seasons portend. A wane of the power, a dwindling reserve of strength. Like a malign flower that flourishes in tropical heat, I wither before the advance of frost, and blacken and die, my seeds buried in the muck at the bottom of the ocean to survive the cruel winter.

I know what I am. I understand the purpose.

I left the farm and disappeared. One more name on the ominous list haunting law enforcement offices in seventeen states. I vanished myself to the Bering Coast — a simple feat for anyone who wants to try. An old man alone on a plane; no one cared. They never do.

There is an old native ghost town on a stretch of desolate beach. Quonset huts with windows shattered or boarded. Grains of snow slither in past open doors when the frigid wind gusts along, moaning through the abandoned FAA towers colored navy gray and rust. The federal government transplanted the villagers to new homes thirteen miles up the beach.

I don't see anyone when I leave the shack I have appropriated and climb the cliffs to regard the sea. The sea being rumpled, a dark scaly hide

marred by plates of thickening ice. Individual islets today, a solid sheet in a few weeks, extending to the horizon. Or forever. I watch the stars as twilight slips down from the sky, a painless veil pricked with beads and sparks. Unfriendly stars. Eventually I return to the shack. It takes me a very long time — I am an old, old man. My shuffle and panting breath are not part of the theater. The shack waits and I light a kerosene lamp and huddle by the Bunsen burner to thaw these antiquitous bones. I do not hunger much this late in the autumn of my cycle, and nobody is misfortunate enough to happen by, so I eschew sustenance another day.

The radio is old too. Scratchy voice from a station in Nome recites the national news — I pay a lot of attention to this when my time draws nigh, looking for a sign, a symbol of tribulations to come — the United Nations is bombing some impoverished country into submission, war criminals from Bosnia are apprehended in Peru. A satellite orbiting Mars has gone off-line, but NASA is quick to reassure the investors that all is routine, in Ethiopia famine is tilling people under by the thousands, an explosion caused a plane to crash into the Atlantic, labor unions are threatening a crippling strike, a bizarre computer virus is hamstringing two major corporations and so on and on. The news is never good, and I am not sure if there is anything I wanted to hear.

I close my rheumy eyes and see a tinsel and sequined probe driving out, out beyond the cold chunk of Pluto. A stone tossed into a bottomless pool, trailing bubbles. I see cabalists hunched over their ciphers, Catholics on their knees before the effigy of Christ, biologists with scalpels and microscopes, astronomers with their mighty lenses pointed at the sky, atheists, and philosophers with fingers pointed at themselves. Military men stroke the cool bulk of their latest killing weapon and feel a touch closer to peace. I see men caressing the crystal and wire and silicon of the machines that tell them what to believe about the laws of physics, the number to slay chaos in its den. I see housewives scrambling to pick the kids up from soccer practice, a child on the porch gazing up, and up, to regard the same piece of sky glimmering in my window. He wonders what is up there, he wonders if there is a monster under his bed. No monsters there, instead they lurk at school, at church, in his uncle's squamous brain. Everyone is looking for the answer. They do not want to find the answer, trust me. Unfortunately, the answer will find them. Life — it's

like one of those unpleasant nature documentaries. To be the cameraman instead of the subjects, eh?

Ah, my skin warns me that it is almost the season. I dreamed for a while, but I do not recall the content. The radio is dead, faint drone from the ancient speaker. The kerosene wick has burned to cinders. A flash from the emerald-colored bottle catches my eye; full of cologne. I seldom indulge in cosmetics; the color attracted me and I brought it here. I am a creature of habit. When my affectations of evolution decay, habit remains steadfast.

Dark outside on the wintry beach. Sunrise is well off and may not come again. The frozen pebbles crackle beneath my heels as I stagger toward the canvas of obsidian water, leaving strange and unsteady tracks on the skeletal shore. There is a mounting sense of urgency building. Mine, or the Other's? I strip my clothes as I go, and end up on the cusp of the sea naked and shriveled. The stars are feral. They shudder — a ripple is spreading across the heavens and the stars are dancing wildly in the pulsating wake. A fulgence that should not be seen begins to seep from the widening fissure. Here is a grand and terrible happening to write of on the wall of a cave....

God opening His Eye to behold the world and all its little works.

I have seen this before. Let others marvel in my place, if they dare. My work is done, now to sleep. When I mount from the occluded depths what will I behold? What will be my clay and how shall I be given to mold it? I slip into the welcoming flank of the sea and allow the current to tug my shell out and down into the abyssal night. It isn't really as cold as I feared. Thoughts are fleeting as the bubbles and the light. The shell begins to flake, to peel, to crumble, and soon I will wriggle free of this fragile vessel.

But —

One final kernel of wisdom gained through the abomination of time and service. A pearl to leave gleaming upon this empty shore; safely assured that no one shall come by to retrieve it and puzzle over the contradiction. Men are afraid of the devil, but there is no devil, just me, and I do as I am bid. It is God who should turn their bowels to soup. Whatever God is, He, or It, created us for amusement. It's too obvious. Just as He created the prehistoric sharks, the dinosaurs, and the humble mechanism that is a crocodile. And Venus flytraps, and black widow

spiders, and human beings. Just as He created a world where every organism survives by rending a weaker organism. Where procreation is an imperative, a leech's sedative against agony and death and disease that accompany the sticky congress of mating. A sticky world, because God dwells in a dark and humid place. A world of appetite, for God is ever hungry. I know, because I am His Mouth.



COMING ATTRACTIONS

HAPPY BIRTHDAY! Next month marks our fifty-third anniversary. Look who's coming to the party:

- Poul Anderson — he'll provide the musical accompaniment
- Ray Bradbury — he's bringing golf clubs
- Neil Gaiman — maybe it's better if we don't tell you what he's

bringing

- Jack O'Connell — a book is always a good gift
- Ian Watson — tickets for a wild trip out of our solar system

Don't miss this special issue!

And don't think the goodies stop after the anniversary issue. For December, it looks like we'll have a science fiction story by Walter Mosley and a new science fiction adventure by Robert Sheckley. Thomas M. Disch's "The Shadow" comes soon, as does Maureen F. McHugh's "Presence." Other stories in the works include a new Albert Cowdrey sf novella in the same world of "Mosh," new stories from Robert Reed and James Morrow, and lots lots more. Sign up now for a subscription so you'll be sure to get each new issue.

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CURIOSITIES

THE JERUSALEM QUARTET,

BY EDWARD WHITEMORE (1979-86)

OUT OF print for fifteen years, Edward Whittemore's *Jerusalem Quartet* (1979-1986) is an essential part of Fantasy's shadow cabinet, a government-in-exile. Surely in some parallel universe, *Sinai Tapestry*, *Jerusalem Poker*, *Nile Shadows*, and *Jericho Mosaic* constitute more than just a loyal opposition.

Whittemore wedded the tradition of the American tall tale and the Arabian Nights to nothing less than History itself. In the process, he created a unique tapestry of absurdly tragic, larger-than-life characters who, placed against the backdrop of historical events, appear life-size. However, despite the complexity of the *Quartet's* many interrelated stories, the narrative always returns to the exploits of a man named Stern. The idealistic Stern tries to use his wealth to bring

peace to the Middle East but ends his days running guns.

In the most ambitious book, *Jerusalem Poker*, the plot is driven by the amazing conceit of a twelve-year poker game (1921-1933) for control of the Holy City. A man who may or may not be seven thousand years old and a thirty-three-volume study of Levantine sex also feature prominently.

Whittemore's *Jerusalem Quartet* — especially *Sinai Tapestry* and *Jerusalem Poker* — displays an almost unparalleled scope and sense of invention. Some blame Whittemore's obscurity on a stubborn refusal to use quotation marks for dialogue; others, on spurious comparisons to Thomas Pynchon. Regardless, readers who discover *The Quartet* and Whittemore's first novel, *Quin's Shanghai Circus*, will delight in the author's fertile imagination and subversive sense of humor. ¶

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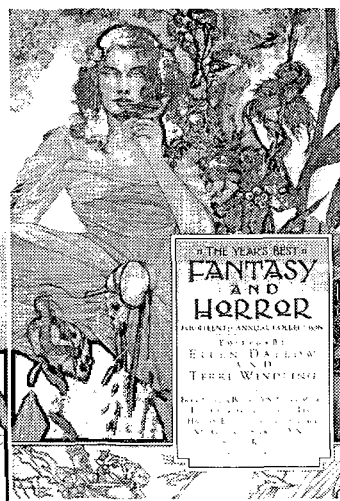
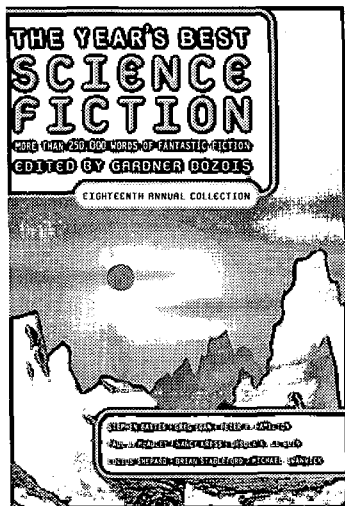
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